

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Russ Ewing

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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>	Ewing, Russ
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Russ Ewing,
<b>Dates:</b>	May 27, 2001
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2001
<b>Physical Description:</b>	6 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:37:44).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Television reporter Russ Ewing (1923 - 2019) was an Emmy Award-winning broadcast journalist for NBC 5 Chicago. A Chicago icon, revered for his special brand of "streetwise reporting," Ewing earned a reputation for fair and humane treatment of those on the margins of society. Also, over the course of his career, more than 100 murder suspects turned themselves in to Ewing. Ewing's distinguished broadcasting career spanned almost forty years. Ewing was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on May 27, 2001, in Paw Paw, Michigan. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2001_031
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Born on the South Side of Chicago on December 28th, 1923, Russ Ewing was orphaned at the age of seven, and subsequently adopted and raised by a close family friend and neighbor, Elizabeth Johnson. From an early age, Ewing dreamed of becoming a commercial pilot.

Not only did he found the popular Russ Ewing Trio, but he went on to work as a firefighter and piano salesman before landing a job as a newsroom courier with NBC 5 Chicago, in 1964. He was promoted to writer and then reporter within two short years, and his on-air debut occurred in 1967. From the beginning, Ewing added a personal approach to news reporting. The first story Ewing covered involved a bank charging higher interest rates to its minority customers. His coverage earned him the first of nine Emmy Awards.

Ewing's distinguished broadcasting career spanned almost forty years. A Chicago icon, revered for his special brand of "streetwise reporting," Ewing earned a reputation for fair and humane treatment of those on the margins of society. Over the course of his career, more than 100 murder suspects turned themselves in to Ewing, and the local police department came to respect his involvement in difficult cases. Ewing's coverage of the infamous John Wayne Gacy murders earned him another Emmy Award and laid the foundation for the best-selling book, *Buried Dreams; Inside The Mind Of A Serial Killer*.

In August 1981, Ewing left NBC 5 and joined the reporting staff of ABC 7 Chicago, where he continued to cover landmark cases and solidify his reputation as a thorough and honest investigative journalist. He retired from the station in 1995; only three years later to rejoin the staff of his first television home, NBC 5 Chicago.

In addition to his many Emmys, the National Academy of Television Arts and Sciences bestowed upon Ewing

their coveted Silver Circle Award. Although Ewing was retired at the time of the interview, he continued to be active in the community.

Russ Ewing was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on May 27, 2001.

Ewing passed away on June 25, 2019.

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## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Russ Ewing was conducted by Julieanna L. Richardson on May 27, 2001, in Paw Paw, Michigan, and was recorded on 6 Betacame SP videocassettes. Television reporter Russ Ewing (1923 - 2019) was an Emmy Award-winning broadcast journalist for NBC 5 Chicago. A Chicago icon, revered for his special brand of "streetwise reporting," Ewing earned a reputation for fair and humane treatment of those on the margins of society. Also, over the course of his career, more than 100 murder suspects turned themselves in to Ewing. Ewing's distinguished broadcasting career spanned almost forty years.

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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:

Ewing, Russ

Richardson, Julieanna L. (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

### Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews  
Ewing, Russ--Interviews

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African American television journalists--Illinois--Chicago--Interviews.

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African American television personalities-Illinois--Chicago--Interviews.

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Jazz--Illinois--Chicago.

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School music--Instruction and study--Illinois--Chicago.

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Fire fighters--Illinois--Chicago--Interviews.

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Discrimination in employment--Illinois--Chicago.

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Glencoe (Ill.)--Race relations.

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O'Connor, Len.

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African Americans in television broadcasting.

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Gacy, John Wayne.

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African Americans in radio broadcasting.

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Music trade--Illinois--Chicago.

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African American newspapers-Illinois--Chicago.

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Simpson, O. J.,1947---Trials, litigation, etc

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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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WMAQ-TV (Television station : Chicago, Ill.)

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**Occupations:**

Television Reporter

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**HistoryMakers® Category:**

## 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 Russ Ewing, May 27, 2001. 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 Russ Ewing, Section A2001\_031\_001\_001, TRT: 0:25:27 ?

Chicago television news reporter Russ Ewing recalls his early life at 42nd St. and Champlain Ave. on Chicago's South Side. Ewing was raised by his Aunt Elizabeth. He was surrounded by jazz music in his childhood neighborhood, where many prominent musicians lived. He began a lifelong love of music and learned the fundamentals at Englewood High School from a gifted staff of instructors. He met his future wife Ruth, who lived down the block from him, in sixth grade. He did a short stint in the Navy where his musical ability landed him a position as a radioman on a ship. After a year living in Seattle, Washington, he returned to Chicago where he formed the Russ Ewing Trio and played at clubs around the city ,such as Archer's Lounge and Jimmy's Palm Gardens.

African American television journalists--Illinois--Chicago--Interviews.

African American television personalities--Illinois--Chicago--Interviews.

Jazz--Illinois--Chicago.

School music--Instruction and study--Illinois--Chicago.

Fire fighters--Illinois--Chicago--Interviews.

Discrimination in employment--Illinois--Chicago.

Glencoe (Ill.)--Race relations.

O'Connor, Len.

African Americans in television broadcasting.

Gacy, John Wayne.

African Americans in radio broadcasting.

Music trade--Illinois--Chicago.

African Americans--Illinois--Chicago--Newspapers.

Simpson, O. J., 1947--Trials, litigation, etc.

Video Oral History Interview with Russ Ewing, Section A2001\_031\_001\_002, TRT: 0:29:00 ?

Retired Chicago news reporter Russ Ewing remembers his years as a jazz musician on the South Side of Chicago, Illinois. He talks about his aunt, Elizabeth Johnson, who raised him after he was orphaned, and an uncle who supported his early interest in music. Ewing then tells several memorable stories about working for the Chicago Fire Department in the 1940s and 1950s, where he encountered a segregated workplace and butted heads with Fire Commissioner Robert J. Quinn. Ewing goes on to discuss his move to Glencoe, Illinois, a predominantly white, middle class suburb. Though he says he was unaffected by any racist attitudes in Glencoe, he relays several anecdotes that suggest otherwise.

Video Oral History Interview with Russ Ewing, Section A2001\_031\_001\_003, TRT: 0:28:38 ?

Russ Ewing, a prominent Chicago news reporter, recalls his third career incarnation (after jazz pianist and fire fighter) as a piano salesman at Lyon and Healy. He tells the stories of some memorable clients such as Eunice Johnson, wife of Ebony magazine publisher John Johnson, and jazz pianist Oscar Peterson. He then goes on to describe his first breaks at NBC Radio, first as a writer, and then an on air personality. He credits Chicago newsman Len O'Connor with supporting his ideas and relates how his race helped him gain trust in the black community and get access to exclusive stories. He speaks candidly about other area news reporters and the inner workings of broadcast news and reporting. He then describes his transition from radio to television news, and the evolution of his knack for convincing criminals to turn themselves in to authorities.

Video Oral History Interview with Russ Ewing, Section A2001\_031\_001\_004, TRT: 0:26:30 ?

Longtime Chicago news reporter Russ Ewing describes the Chicago television news scene and how it has changed over the years from an industry driven by accurate and compelling reporting, to one that is run by 'bean counters.' He tells several stories of criminal fugitives he assisted in apprehending through his uncanny ability to gain people's trust. Ewing goes on to discuss police reaction to his antics, which was not always positive. He then recalls his first meeting with John Wayne Gacy, about whom he would co-author the book *Buried Dreams: Inside the Mind of a Serial Killer*. He describes how he gained Gacy's trust, but refuses to analyze the motivations behind Gacy's crimes.

Video Oral History Interview with Russ Ewing, Section A2001\_031\_001\_005, TRT: 0:28:38 ?

Renowned news reporter Russ Ewing elaborates on his relationship with convicted murderer John Wayne Gacy and the writing of his book *Buried Dreams: Inside The Mind Of A Serial Killer*. He recalls other notable news stories he covered and expresses disappointment over the Reverend Paul Hall molestation case in which many of Hall's parishioners refused to believe in his

guilt. He also expresses sadness at the black community's adulation of drug dealer Flukey Stokes, whose death Ewing refused to cover. Ewing goes on to convey a certain amount of pessimism over the current state of television news and the prospects for African-Americans in the broadcasting industry. Lastly, Ewing discusses the future of the Chicago Defender, saying although there is a market for the newspaper, it is up to the Sengstacke family to save it.

Video Oral History Interview with Russ Ewing, Section A2001\_031\_001\_006, TRT: 0:19:31 ?

Veteran Chicago news reporter Russ Ewing gives his opinion on the O. J. Simpson verdict. He then names several Chicago television news reporters who he considers up and coming. Ewing goes on to discuss his lifelong loves, flying and music. He expresses pride in the trust he inspires in people, and attributes this trust to his own honesty in life. Lastly, Ewing modestly considers his legacy and says that it doesn't matter if he is remembered, though in the end, he is happy that he is.