

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Arthur Burton, Sr.

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Burton, Arthur T.
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Arthur Burton, Sr.,
Dates:	May 18, 2002
Bulk Dates:	2002
Physical Description:	5 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:25:34).
Abstract:	Pullman porter Arthur Burton, Sr. (1903 - 2005) was over 100 years old, and a member of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters. Burton was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on May 18, 2002, in Chicago, Illinois. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2002_069
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Arthur Burton, Sr., one of the Pullman Porters was born September 10, 1903, in Winterville, Mississippi. Burton was the oldest of five children. When Burton's mother, who ran a small store, died when he was twelve years old, he accompanied his father to Earl, Arkansas for construction work. His father was a carpenter and Burton helped him build "shotgun houses," small shacks in which one could look through the front door and see straight through to the back.

One Saturday, dressed in his favorite shirt, Burton with the other youngsters "flipped" a train. Burton, who had not mastered the technique, jumped off at the wrong time and was flung down an embankment severely lacerating his head and cracking his skull. He carried a deep scar in his head for the rest of his life. Burton finished grade school when he was in his twenties.

In 1930, he was hired by The Pullman Company and was soon assigned to the Santa Fe Super Chief, California Limited, and the Scout, among others. Being a porter consisted mostly of making beds and cleaning up, but what was most difficult was the way Pullman treated the black porters. Often management would forget to feed porters not adjacent to dining cars. The hours were also grueling. Porters were officially allowed four hours of sleep a night. Working twenty days a month, Porters would average about two hours of sleep a night. The pay was about half that of factory workers. These factors and the blatant disrespect by management and the public, who referred to all porters as "George" caused them to organize behind A. Phillip Randolph in 1924.

Ten years of struggle yielded victory on August 21, 1935. Burton, now living in Chicago, was a member of the Union of Sleeping Car Porters and drove local leaders to and from headquarters at 43rd and Michigan Avenue. Burton was a porter for thirty-eight years and six months. He met celebrities like Gloria Swanson, Bob Hope, Buck and Bubbles, Jack Benny and Eddie Rochester Anderson. Burton was proudest of the fact that with his own hands, he built his own house and that of his son; author Arthur Burton, Jr. in Phoenix, Illinois.

Burton passed away on March 25, 2005 at age 101.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Arthur Burton, Sr. was conducted by Larry Crowe on May 18, 2002, in Chicago, Illinois, and was recorded on 5 Betacame SP videocassettes. Pullman porter Arthur Burton, Sr. (1903 - 2005) was over 100 years old, and a member of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters.

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:

Burton, Arthur T.

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews
Burton, Arthur T.--Interviews

Pullman porters--Interviews

Older men--Interviews

Urban elderly--Illinois--Chicago--Interviews

African American labor union members--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Pullman Railroad Company

Occupations:

Pullman Porter

HistoryMakers® Category:

CivicMakers

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 Arthur Burton, Sr., May 18, 2002. 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 Arthur Burton, Sr., Section A2002_069_001_001, TRT: 0:29:29
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Arthur Burton describes his family background. Burton was born to Frank and Ruth Burton on September 10, 1903 in Winterville, Mississippi. Frank Burton was a carpenter and a storeowner, while Ruth Burton was a housewife. The Burtons moved to Earl, Arkansas around 1915. It was here that Burton saw whites working in cotton fields for the first time, and learned carpentry by building shotgun houses with his father. As a youth, his favorite foods included sardines, crackers and cheese, and whirly fair cake. He also received his eight grade diploma in Earl, Kansas around 1923. While spending time with some older boys in Earl as a youth, Burton attempted to “flip”, or jump off, a moving train. Burton hit his head on the train tracks, and the boys avoided seeking immediate medical attention for fear of getting arrested. Burton was taken to the doctor by his father after returning home, and was told that he had cracked his skull. Burton has a permanent gash from the accident.

Pullman porters--Interviews.

Older men--Interviews.

Urban elderly--Illinois--Chicago--Interviews.

African American labor union members--Interviews.

Video Oral History Interview with Arthur Burton, Sr., Section A2002_069_001_002, TRT: 0:30:55
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Arthur Burton shares stories about his childhood in Winterville, Mississippi. On one occasion, Burton planned to go duck-hunting on the lake near his family's home, yet changed his mind when he realized there were alligators in the water. In another instance, the lake flooded the family's property. Burton dunked his little brother, Leroy, in the waters, and received a beating for it. Around 1915, the Burton family moved to Earl, Arkansas. While playing with some boys in Earl, Burton “flipped” a train, which resulted in a major head wound. For fear of getting beaten by his father, Burton told the doctor he had fallen off of a lumber stack. Burton has a permanent scar from this accident, and later witnessed someone die after “flipping” a train. After his mother's death, Burton moved to Little Rock, Arkansas to work as a chauffeur for a white family. Horrifically, he witnessed one of the family's sons murder the other. Burton also talked about his pet calf, Logan.

Video Oral History Interview with Arthur Burton, Sr., Section A2002_069_001_003, TRT: 0:30:09
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In 1930, Arthur Burton was waiting to see if he had passed his exam to work for the U.S. Postal service when he was contacted by the Pullman Car Company. He was hired as a Pullman Porter, and a day later, was contacted to begin work for the U.S. Postal Service. He was assigned to the Santa Fe Super Chief, California Limited, Scout routes, and worked as many as twenty days out of the month. His primary responsibilities included making beds and keeping the train cars tidy. Though Pullman Porters were allotted four hours of sleep nightly, Burton rarely slept. He also made \$24 a month, and was paid only for the daytime hours he worked. Being a Pullman Porter was a dangerous job, as it was not uncommon for the porters to be robbed when trains stopped at night. Burton avoided being drafted to serve in the U.S. Army during WWII because of his porter duties. A.

Philip Randolph's leadership of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters during the 1930s transformed Burton's experiences as a Pullman Porter drastically.

Video Oral History Interview with Arthur Burton, Sr., Section A2002_069_001_004, TRT: 0:29:21
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In 1925, A. Philip Randolph organized The Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters (BSCP). Arthur Burton became a member of this union in the 1930s. He often drove the Co-Founder and Vice President of the BSCP, Milton Price Webster, to union meetings at the Chicago Headquarters. Burton also comments on A. Phillip Randolph's leadership abilities. Burton encountered many famous people on his train routes, including entertainers Paul Newman, Gloria Swanson, and Jack Benny. His favorite route was the Santa Fe Super Chief, which stretched from the Midwest to California. Pullman Porters were responsible for helping keep train cars segregated on Southern routes. Pullman trains ran on steam and diesel engines, and the fast trains were mail trains. Pullman Porters used secret signals to keep one another out of trouble. Nevertheless, they could still be fired for having sex with female passengers and coming up short on ticket money. Arthur Burton served as a Pullman Porter from 1930 to 1968.

Video Oral History Interview with Arthur Burton, Sr., Section A2002_069_001_005, TRT: 0:25:40
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On his train routes in the South, Arthur Burton, along with other Pullman Porters, was often called "boy" or "George" by passengers. Burton describes how the Richmond Boys, a Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters Group, helped bring an end to this treatment. After ten years of being a Pullman Porter, Burton met his wife in Oklahoma City, and the two were married in 1940. He retired from the Pullman Car Company in 1968, settled in Chicago, Illinois, and received a small pension from the company. Burton talks about his love of fishing and frogs, and shares his thoughts on young people. He describes how he would like to be remembered, as well as the importance of meeting people with unique experiences. Arthur Burton closes the interview by narrating his photographs.