

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with The Honorable R. Eugene Pincham

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Pincham, R. Eugene, 1925-2008
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable R. Eugene Pincham,
Dates:	August 13, 2002, January 17, 2007 and May 5, 2003
Bulk Dates:	2002, 2003 and 2007
Physical Description:	14 Betacame SP videocassettes (6:38:11).
Abstract:	Civil rights activist, county circuit court judge, state appellate court judge, and trial lawyer The Honorable R. Eugene Pincham (1925 - 2008) grew up poor in Alabama before becoming a fixture in the Illinois legal system. As a judge Pincham, had a reputation of seeking justice for the poor as well as the rich. Pincham was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on August 13, 2002, January 17, 2007 and May 5, 2003, in Chicago, Illinois. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2002_176
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

R. Eugene Pincham, human rights activist, lawyer, former judge of the Circuit Court of Cook County, Illinois, and justice of the Appellate Court of Illinois, was a strident critic of the criminal justice system. He was born on June 28, 1925 in Chicago, Illinois but grew up impoverished in Alabama. After his high school graduation in 1942, Pincham became interested in becoming a lawyer. He attended college at LeMoyne College in Memphis, Tennessee, and in 1944, he transferred to Tennessee State University in Nashville, where he earned his B.S. degree in political science in 1947. In 1948, Pincham married his college sweetheart, Alzata C. Henry, and that same year enrolled in Northwestern University School of Law. Despite the fact that he had to wait tables at the Palmer House Hotel and shine shoes as a full-time student, Pincham earned his J.D. degree in 1951.

Pincham then began to practice law as an attorney in the state and federal courts. In 1954, he accepted an offer to practice law with the firm that became Evins, Pincham, Fowlkes and Cooper. In 1965, Pincham was admitted to the Bar of the U.S. Supreme Court. In 1976, Pincham became a Circuit Court of Cook County judge and was assigned to the Criminal Division, where he served until 1984. He went on to become a justice of the Appellate Court of Illinois. There, Pincham gained a reputation as one who sought justice for the poor as well as the rich. Pincham resigned from the bench in 1989 and unsuccessfully sought the Democratic Party's nomination for president of the Cook County Board of Commissioners. In 1991, he became the Harold Washington Party's nominee for Mayor of Chicago. Although he lost, Pincham carried nineteen of the city's fifty wards - a powerful endorsement from the African American community.

A member of the American Civil Liberties Union and a lifetime member of the NAACP, Pincham continued to lectured and instructed in trial and appellate techniques and advocacy after his retirement. He received numerous

awards for his professional and community service and activism. Pincham passed away on April 3, 2008 at the age of 82.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with The Honorable R. Eugene Pincham was conducted by Adele Hodge and Larry Crowe on August 13, 2002, January 17, 2007 and May 5, 2003, in Chicago, Illinois, and was recorded on 14 Betacame SP videocassettes. Civil rights activist, county circuit court judge, state appellate court judge, and trial lawyer The Honorable R. Eugene Pincham (1925 - 2008) grew up poor in Alabama before becoming a fixture in the Illinois legal system. As a judge Pincham, had a reputation of seeking justice for the poor as well as the rich.

Restrictions

Restrictions on Access

Restrictions may be applied on a case-by-case basis at the discretion of The HistoryMakers®.

Restrictions on Use

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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.

Controlled Access Terms

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

Persons:

Pincham, R. Eugene, 1925-2008

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Hodge, Adele (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Pincham, R. Eugene, 1925-2008--Interviews

African American judges--Illinois--Interviews

African American lawyers--Illinois--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Cook County (Ill.)

Illinois

Evins, Pincham, Fowlkes and Cooper

Occupations:

Civil Rights Activist

County Circuit Court Judge

State Appellate Court Judge

Trial Lawyer

HistoryMakers® Category:

CivicMakers|LawMakers

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 The Honorable R. Eugene Pincham, August 13, 2002, January 17, 2007 and May 5, 2003. 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 The Honorable R. Eugene Pincham, Section
A2002_176_001_001, TRT: 0:31:15 ?

R. Eugene Pincham was born on June 28, 1925 in Chicago, Illinois to Hazel Caldwell and William E. Pincham, Sr. Pincham's maternal grandmother, Safronia Sowell, was a devoutly religious woman who worked long hours as a domestic servant. His mother was born in Athens, Limestone County, Alabama. She was a hard-working woman who raised her two sons with a value for education and pride in their ancestors. Pincham's mother attended Trinity School in Athens, which was founded by the American Missionary Association. As a student, she spent a summer in Rockford, Illinois working as a domestic for a Trinity teacher where she met Pincham's father. After Pincham began his career as a lawyer, he sent his mother through college, allowing her to become a schoolteacher. Pincham describes memories of growing up poor, and of his mother, who was an inspiration to him.

African American judges--Illinois--Interviews.

African American lawyers--Illinois--Interviews.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable R. Eugene Pincham, Section
A2002_176_001_002, TRT: 0:31:12 ?

R. Eugene Pincham's parents, Hazel Caldwell and William E. Pincham, divorced when he was a baby and his mother, moved from Chicago, Illinois back to her hometown, Athens, Alabama, to raise her two sons. As a young boy, Pincham and his brother resented their absentee father, but his mother taught them otherwise. Later in life, Pincham enjoyed a very close relationship with his father. Pincham spent a brief stint at LeMoyne College in Memphis, Tennessee until he was expelled for poor academics and his lack of deportment. He then enrolled at Tennessee State University in Nashville, Tennessee where he met his wife, Alzata Pincham. Pincham graduated from Tennessee State with a bachelor's degree in political science in 1947. He then enrolled at Northwestern University School of Law where he was the only black student in his class. In 1964, Pincham traveled to Jackson, Mississippi to volunteer his services as a lawyer in the Freedom Summer campaign. Pincham describes the consequences of the shift in the Civil Rights Movement's focus from equality to integration.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable R. Eugene Pincham, Section
A2002_176_001_003, TRT: 0:31:25 ?

R. Eugene Pincham worked as a day laborer in the cotton fields of Athens,

Alabama as a young boy where he learned about the importance of helping others. In 1948, Pincham enrolled at Northwestern University School of Law. During his time in law school, Pincham waited tables and shined shoes to pay his tuition. He never missed a class and he graduated from Northwestern University in 1951. However, Pincham was almost prohibited from taking the bar exam because of outstanding tuition fees. As a lawyer, Pincham has argued three cases before the United States Supreme Court. He talks about his experiences in court, his wife's support both inside and outside the courtroom, and juror psychology. Pincham also talks about historical provisions for slavery in the Constitution of the United States and his own approach to the law.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable R. Eugene Pincham, Section A2002_176_001_004, TRT: 0:23:40 ?

R. Eugene Pincham enrolled at Northwestern University School of Law in 1948. He graduated from there in 1951. While in law school, Pincham married his college sweetheart, Alzata Pincham. They spent the first few months of their marriage apart; Pincham was in law school and his wife worked in Mississippi as a store manager. After his wife secured the funds to join Pincham in Chicago, Illinois, she began working as a substitute teacher in the city. Pincham's wife continued teaching for ten years until the birth of their last child. Pincham has three children: Robert Pincham, Jr., Andrea Pincham, and James Pincham. Both of Pincham's sons obtained law degrees, but decided to pursue teaching; his daughter is a doctor. Unlike their father, Pincham's children kept out of the public eye. Pincham describes his marriage and his commitment to his wife. He also describes his approach from the bench as a judge.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable R. Eugene Pincham, Section A2002_176_002_005, TRT: 0:30:12 ?

R. Eugene Pincham struggled to find a job after graduating from Northwestern University School of Law in 1951 due to racial discrimination. To survive, Pincham worked as a dishwasher and continued to do so even after starting a job at the law office of Joseph E. Clayton, Jr. After Clayton offered him competitive pay, Pincham transitioned to working full-time. Clayton taught Pincham important lessons about being a front line lawyer and working long hours. Pincham wrote many briefs and appeals for Clayton and first appeal overturned Eugene Phillip Childress' death sentence. In 1956, Pincham left Clayton to practice with the firm that eventually became Evins, Pincham, Fowlkes and Cooper. After Clayton's death, Pincham inherited many of his former boss' clients. Pincham successfully argued his first case before the United States Supreme Court, which reversed the conviction of Ronald Owens. Pincham talks about making ends meet.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable R. Eugene Pincham, Section A2002_176_002_006, TRT: 0:30:58 ?

R. Eugene Pincham provided Civil Rights workers in Mississippi with legal representation in 1964 where he witnessed and experienced racial discrimination. Pincham was in Mississippi during the murders of civil rights activists James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner, and the civil rights movement had a profound impact on Pincham's practice of law. After six months in Mississippi, Pincham returned to his law firm, Evins, Pincham, Fowlkes, and Cooper. He describes high profile cases including the Alfano murder trial, a landmark case where he successfully won an acquittal for members of the Black P. Stone Nation framed by the Chicago Police Department in the murder of Detective James Alfano, Jr. From 1976 to 1984, Pincham served as a judge on the Circuit Court of Cook County Illinois. From

there, he was appointed to the Appellate Court of Illinois where he served from 1984 to 1990. He worked on Harold Washington's mayoral campaigns and registered voters.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable R. Eugene Pincham, Section
A2002_176_002_007, TRT: 0:30:30 ?

R. Eugene Pincham describes the destructive impact of political in-fighting on Chicago's black community after Mayor Harold Washington's death in 1987. He believes that cultural barriers, cultural indoctrination, and systemic inequality prevented African Americans from exercising their right to vote. In 1990, Pincham left his post in the Appellate Court of Illinois to run for President of the Cook County Board of Commissioners in protest of the Democratic Party's slight of John H. Stroger. As the Chairman of Cook County's Finance Committee, Stroger should have been slated for County Board President, but was passed over due to his race. Although Pincham's bid was unsuccessful, his campaign opened up the political arena for black politicians across Illinois like HistoryMakers Carol Moseley-Braun, Todd Stroger, and Jesse White. In 1991, Pincham ran for the Mayor of Chicago on the Harold Washington Party ticket. He talks about Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and the court case that inspired the Probation Challenge.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable R. Eugene Pincham, Section
A2002_176_002_008, TRT: 0:30:23 ?

R. Eugene Pincham describes what inspired Probation Challenge, a nonprofit organization headed by HistoryMaker Harold E. Bailey. Housed at Olive-Harvey College in Chicago, Illinois, Probation Challenge was designed to help those on probation to obtain GEDs. Pincham talks about the Patty Columbo-Frank DeLuca case in which he sentenced Columbo and DeLuca to 200 to 300 years in prison for parricide. He describes the case of People v. Smith in which Terrance Smith was sentenced to 200 to 300 years in prison for murder. Throughout his legal career, Pincham taught at law schools across the country including Yale University, Princeton University, Stanford University, and the University of Chicago. He attributes much of his success to the support of his wife, Alzata Pincham. A defendant of free press, Pincham also acknowledges its failings, citing the media's favorable depiction of the prosecution in the O.J. Simpson case. Pincham also talks about the impact of technological developments on legal outcomes in court.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable R. Eugene Pincham, Section
A2002_176_002_009, TRT: 0:20:50 ?

R. Eugene Pincham describes his role in the Ryan Harris case. In this case, Pincham worked with co-counsel Andre Grant to mount a defense of the seven and eight-year-old boys charged with the murder of eleven-year-old Ryan Harris. Pincham describes the details of the case including the role of the media and how the defense determined that the young boys were framed by Officers James Cassidy and Allen Nathaniel in the Chicago Police Department. Pincham also talks about the Lori Roscetti case, in which four boys were convicted for raping and murdering a nursing student. The boys, convicted in part by the testimony of a crime lab technician who lied about the DNA evidence, were later exonerated by the same DNA evidence. Pincham talks about how key figures in the Chicago Police Department and in the DNA lab retained their jobs, and were even promoted despite the miscarriage of justice.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable R. Eugene Pincham, Section
A2002_176_003_010, TRT: 0:31:13 ?

R. Eugene Pincham describes the Ryan Harris case as an extreme abuse of

justice and the resulting multi-million dollar settlements awarded to the seven and eight-year-old boys framed in the murder of Ryan Harris. Although Pincham presented the evidence from the case to the Superintendent of the Chicago Police Department, Terry Hilliard, Hilliard did not reprimand or discipline the officers involved in the framing of the two young boys in the case, James Cassidy and Allen Nathaniel. Pincham also describes framing of an eleven-year-old boy in the murder of Anna Gilvis. He talks about the role of Office James Cassidy in framing young boys in the murders of Ryan Harris and of Anna Gilvis. Cassidy was never reprimanded by the Chicago Police Department. Pincham talks about why the potential of black political power in the City of Chicago has yet to be realized. He also discusses the potential implications of HistoryMaker Barack Obama's choice to gain seniority in the senate or run for president.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable R. Eugene Pincham, Section
A2002_176_003_011, TRT: 0:29:19 ?

R. Eugene Pincham discusses HistoryMaker Barack Obama's historic presidential candidacy. Pincham is staunchly opposed to outsourcing production overseas, describing its impact on American jobs. Pincham talks at length about racial injustice in the criminal justice system, citing rampant racial profiling in the City of Chicago and pointing to the black community's overrepresentation in the legal system and its lack of presence in the Chicago Police Department and Cook County State's Attorney's Office. Pincham describes the amount of money the City of Chicago has spent defending its police officers and the need for a prosecutorial body to "police the police". In 1996, Pincham ran for Cook County State's Attorney's office to highlight and to fight racial discrimination. Pincham also talks about several of his current cases including R. Kelly's defense and Chicago's E2 nightclub.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable R. Eugene Pincham, Section
A2002_176_003_012, TRT: 0:30:20 ?

R. Eugene Pincham talks about several current cases as well as his approach to cases including the charges faced by the owners of Chicago's E2 nightclub over the tragic 2003 stampede. Pincham reflects on his legacy and mistakes made during his mayoral bid in 1991. Pincham's personal heroes include civil rights activists Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Thurgood Marshall, Fannie Lou Hamer, Reverend James Reeb, James Chaney, Michael Schwerner, and Andrew Goodman. The American Missionary Association, a group of white New England teachers who went to the South after the Civil War to set up schools for emancipated slaves, also had a profound impact on Pincham's life. The organization's legacy includes institutions of higher learning like Fisk University, LeMoyne College, Talladega College, Tougaloo College, Berea College, and Dillard University. As children, Pincham and his mother both attended Trinity School in Athens, Limestone County, Alabama, which was also established by the American Missionary Association.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable R. Eugene Pincham, Section
A2002_176_003_013, TRT: 0:26:12 ?

R. Eugene Pincham describes the impact of his teachers at Trinity School in Athens, Limestone County, Alabama from the American Missionary Association on his spiritual formation and his approach to law and life. He talks about his wife, Alzata Pincham, how they met, their marriage, and their three children. Pincham addresses educational inequity and describes how he would like to be remembered.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable R. Eugene Pincham, Section
A2002_176_003_014, TRT: 0:20:42 ?

R. Eugene Pincham narrates his photographs.