

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Charles Johnson

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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>	Johnson, Charles, 1909-2006
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Charles Johnson,
<b>Dates:</b>	January 13, 2003
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2003
<b>Physical Description:</b>	4 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:01:45).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Union leader and baseball player Charles Johnson (1909 - 2006 ) played for the Negro Leagues, barnstorming with the Chicago American Giants until 1944. He then went to work for the Illinois Central Railroad Company, winning an anti-discrimination lawsuit against them and became the first African American special agent in 1970. Johnson was an active advocate for the creation of a pension fund for the Negro League players. Johnson was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on January 13, 2003, in Chicago, Illinois. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2003_003
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Former Negro League baseball player Charles Johnson has fought against discrimination for most of his long life. Born on August 7, 1909, in Pine Bluff, Arkansas, Johnson never knew his father. He lived with his mother, uncle and grandmother, bouncing back and forth between Arkansas; Kansas City, Missouri; and St. Louis. Johnson moved to Chicago in 1925 to be with his dying mother, and from age fifteen lived on his own. He worked at a grocery store on the South Side and became acquainted with Negro League great Ted "Double Duty" Radcliffe.

In 1930, Johnson went on his first barnstorming tour of Canada with the Texas Giants, and went with the team again in 1931. When he returned home to Chicago, the Great Depression had set in, forcing Johnson to rely on bread lines and flop houses to subsist. He later joined the famed Chicago American Giants of the Negro League, pitching and playing outfield. When not playing baseball, Johnson worked in stockyards, and in 1940 took a job in electroplating. Johnson was married in 1942, and his wife, Julia, forced him to give up traveling with the Giants. He finally quit playing in the Negro Leagues in 1944.

Johnson went to work for the Illinois Central Railroad Company in 1951 as a porter, lured by its pension plan. He became an active member of his union and helped file a lawsuit against the railroad in 1965 for discrimination. After five years of litigation, the railroad relented and he became the first African American special agent for the IC. Johnson retired from the railroad in 1974. Since retiring, Johnson has worked to get himself and 140 other former Negro League players accepted into a pension fund established by the Major League Baseball Players Association. Though the fund was created to provide assistance to elderly Negro Leaguers, Johnson and others have not been able to receive support checks from it.

Johnson's wife died in 1999. They had no children. Johnson lived on Chicago's South Side until he passed away on

June 19, 2006 at the age of 96.

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## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Charles Johnson was conducted by Larry Crowe on January 13, 2003, in Chicago, Illinois, and was recorded on 4 Betacame SP videocassettes. Union leader and baseball player Charles Johnson (1909 - 2006 ) played for the Negro Leagues, barnstorming with the Chicago American Giants until 1944. He then went to work for the Illinois Central Railroad Company, winning an anti-discrimination lawsuit against them and became the first African American special agent in 1970. Johnson was an active advocate for the creation of a pension fund for the Negro League players.

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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:

Johnson, Charles, 1909-2006

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

### Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Johnson, Charles, 1909-2006 --Interviews

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African American baseball players--Interviews

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African American civil rights workers--Interviews

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Porters--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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Illinois Central Railroad Company

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Negro American League

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## Occupations:

Union Leader

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Baseball Player

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## HistoryMakers® Category:

CivicMakers|SportsMakers

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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 Charles Johnson, January 13, 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).

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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 Charles Johnson, Section A2003\_003\_001\_001, TRT: 0:29:10 ?

Charles Johnson was born on August 7, 1909 in Pine Bluff, Arkansas to Alice Totten Johnson. Johnson never knew his father, but lived with his mother, uncle, and grandmother. Johnson's grandmother was a Seminole Indian who was separated from her family when she was a young girl and hid under the house when men came to take her family away. In 1916, Johnson moved to Kansas City, Missouri with his mother, grandmother, and uncle, where he attended the Reserved Street School. In 1919, Johnson's mother married and they moved back to outside of Pine Bluff, Arkansas. Around 1923, when he was thirteen, Johnson ran away from his step-father's farm, taking a train with his mother who also wanted to leave and go to Pine Bluff. He then traveled alone to Saint Louis, Missouri. In February 1925, Johnson's mother moved to Chicago, Illinois and Johnson joined her there before she died that April. Johnson attended Wendell Phillips High School but did not graduate, working in grocery stores and playing baseball instead.

African American baseball players--Interviews.

African American civil rights workers--Interviews.

Porters--Interviews.

Video Oral History Interview with Charles Johnson, Section A2003\_003\_001\_002, TRT: 0:30:00 ?

Charles Johnson began playing baseball in 1928 with the Chicago Giants after Alec Radcliffe recommended him to Joe Green. Johnson was a catcher and pitcher for the American Giants, National Elite Giants, Chicago Giants, Union Giants, Illinois Giants, Hartfield Giants, Texas Giants, and All Nation Clowns. With these teams, he played mostly in Canada and the bordering states. Johnson describes players like Satchel Paige and HistoryMaker Ted "Double Duty" Radcliffe, the lack of contracts given to players in the Negro leagues, and the prevalence of church leagues. Johnson remembers two memorable experiences with racism that he and teammate Al Morehead encountered while touring; one in Baraboo, Wisconsin when the team could not stay at a hotel and another in Jefferson, Wisconsin when his team was watched by the police. Johnson quit playing baseball in 1944.

Video Oral History Interview with Charles Johnson, Section A2003\_003\_001\_003, TRT: 0:31:20 ?

Charles Johnson played baseball with the Negro Leagues from 1928 until 1944. During this time, he mostly played in Canada, where he encountered racism in cities close to the U.S. border. He played with greats including HistoryMaker Ted "Double Duty" Radcliffe, Walter C. "Steel Arm" Davis, James "Sandy" Thompson, Jack "Boss" Marshall, Jim Brown, Frog Hosley, and Old Folks McDonald. From 1934 until 1937, Johnson temporarily quit baseball to work in a grocery store. In 1942, Johnson married Julia Johnson. Johnson worked as an electroplater during and after World War II to avoid serving in the military. From 1951 until 1974, Johnson worked for the Illinois Central Railroad

Company as a porter. In 1965, he helped to file a discrimination suit against the railroad, which was settled in 1969 with the help of lawyer Marion Garnett. That year, Johnson became the first black special agent for Illinois Central. Johnson reflects on the current salary of baseball players and lack of pensions for Negro League players.

Video Oral History Interview with Charles Johnson, Section A2003\_003\_001\_004, TRT: 0:31:15 ?

Charles Johnson describes his concerns for the African American community, particularly the divisiveness he believes is preventing the community from looking after others and the disrespect for authority he sees in young black athletes. He reflects upon his family, his legacy, and how he would like to be remembered. He also discusses his plans for the future and whether he will continue living alone after a recent break-in at his house. He ends the interview by narrating his photographs.