

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with The Honorable Earl Strayhorn

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Strayhorn, Earl
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Earl Strayhorn,
Dates:	January 14, 2003
Bulk Dates:	2003
Physical Description:	7 Betacame SP videocassettes (3:04:15).
Abstract:	County circuit court judge The Honorable Earl Strayhorn (1918 - 2009) was the former head of the Cook County, Illinois courts. Strayhorn was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on January 14, 2003, in Chicago, Illinois. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2003_005
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Judge Earl Edward Strayhorn was born on April 24, 1918, in Columbus, Mississippi to Minnie Lee Orvis Strayhorn and Earl Edward Strayhorn, Sr. He graduated from Tilden Tech High School in Chicago in 1936. Strayhorn received an A.B. degree from the University of Illinois in 1941 and his J.D. degree from DePaul University Law School in 1948. He also served his country as an artillery officer as one of the Tuskegee Airmen.

From 1949 until 1952, Strayhorn worked as a prosecuting assistant state's attorney for Cook County, Illinois. From 1952 until 1970, he had his own practice while serving as Chicago civil service commissioner between 1959 and 1963. In 1970, he became a Cook County Circuit Court judge, serving for twenty-eight years in the administrative offices of the Illinois courts. Known for his independent thinking and his unique sense of justice, Strayhorn was well respected for his no-nonsense style in the courtroom. From 1995 until he retired in 1998, he headed the county court system's largest section, the First Municipal Division.

Strayhorn taught law classes at numerous colleges and universities, including: Northwestern University School of Law, Harvard Law School, Emory University College of Law, the National College of Criminal Defense Attorneys, Cardozo School of Law and the National Institute of Trial Advocacy. Strayhorn served as vice president of the Chicago Urban League from 1948 until 1960 and has been on the boards of many organizations. He was a member of the NAACP and was parliamentarian for Tuskegee Airmen, Inc. from 1985 to 1994.

Strayhorn was married to Lygia Eugenia and had two children, Donald and Earlene. He passed away on February 15, 2009 at the age of 90.

Strayhorn was interviewed by The HistoryMakers on January 14, 2003.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with The Honorable Earl Strayhorn was conducted by Larry Crowe on January 14, 2003, in Chicago, Illinois, and was recorded on 7 Betacame SP videocassettes. County circuit court judge The Honorable Earl Strayhorn (1918 - 2009) was the former head of the Cook County, Illinois courts.

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:

- Strayhorn, Earl
- Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)
- Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

- African Americans--Interviews
 - Strayhorn, Earl--Interviews
-

Organizations:

- HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)
 - The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection
 - Cook County (Ill.)
-

Occupations:

County Circuit Court Judge

HistoryMakers® Category:

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 Earl Strayhorn, January 14, 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 Earl Strayhorn, Section A2003_005_001_001, TRT: 0:29:15 ?

Judge Earl Strayhorn details his life as a young boy growing up in Mississippi and soon joining the Great Migration to land in Chicago as a 5 year old boy. He describes his parents lives and the loss of his father to lead poisoning in 1935. Strayhorn describes his South side neighborhood and family life in the 1920s and 1930s.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Earl Strayhorn, Section A2003_005_001_002, TRT: 0:30:00 ?

Earl Strayhorn details his childhood years at Doolittle Elementary to Tilden Technical High School. He describes a racist high school instructor who eventually came to head the Chicago Teacher's Union he balances the story with tales of his favorite and most influential teachers. Strayhorn goes on the talk about his years and activities at the University of Illinois in Champaign-Urbana.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Earl Strayhorn, Section A2003_005_001_003, TRT: 0:29:35 ?

Earl Strayhorn details his experience in the military during World War II. In an especially hilarious tale, he describes how a simple dinner invitation in Italy changed his mind about cats forever. Strayhorn also shares contemporaneous memories of life in the barracks, Tuskegee Airmen and Pearl Harbor.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Earl Strayhorn, Section A2003_005_001_004, TRT: 0:28:35 ?

Earl Strayhorn discusses his early legal career in Chicago as a state's attorney. He describes how he grew into his position as an advocate for the state then later as a criminal defense attorney. Strayhorn details some of his more memorable cases, for example representing Joe Louis's manager in a tax evasion case. Strayhorn also recalls other associates from those early years who eventually became well known jurists in Chicago, Eugene Pincham, and George Leighton for example.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Earl Strayhorn, Section A2003_005_001_005, TRT: 0:30:15 ?

Earl Strayhorn describes the racism he and his law partners faced in finding a space for their new firm. Strayhorn delights in retelling their success in outsmarting their racist landlord. Strayhorn describes the influence of U. S. Congressman William Levi Dawson

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Earl Strayhorn, Section A2003_005_001_006, TRT: 0:29:15 ?

Earl Strayhorn wraps up his account of the most heinous murder case he presided over as judge. He speaks at length about the death penalty and the recent commutation of death row sentences by former Illinois governor George Ryan. Strayhorn touches upon some of the challenges he faced as a presiding judge, i.e. sitting in final judgement of people. After 28 years on criminal bench, Strayhorn now serves as the presiding judge and he discusses what some of his duties are in the position.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Earl Strayhorn, Section A2003_005_001_007, TRT: 0:07:20 ?

In this short segment, Judge Earl Strayhorn offers some solutions for improving the judiciary and the future of the black community. Strayhorn says he is too young to ponder his legacy, but wants to be remembered "as a person that was fair and just and called them as he saw them, regardless of the outcome."