

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Irma Josephine Barber

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers® 1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Barber, Irma Josephine, 1904-2004
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Irma Josephine Barber,
Dates:	March 18, 2003 and March 26, 2003
Bulk Dates:	2003
Physical Description:	7 Betacame SP videocassettes (3:07:00).
Abstract:	City government employee and seamstress Irma Josephine Barber (1904 - 2004) lived in Chicago for over eighty years, where she worked for the Department of Forestry. Barber was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on March 18, 2003 and March 26, 2003, in Chicago, Illinois. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2003_051
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Irma Josephine Barber was born Irma Josephine Mason on March 13, 1904, in New Orleans, Louisiana. Raised Catholic by her parents, Barber enjoyed attending a private Catholic school and planned to become a nun. When her father, who had supported the family by working for the city of New Orleans, died, she had to leave school to help her mother, brother and three sisters. In 1918, the family moved to Chicago, seeking greater opportunity. In the city, Barber and her sisters were able to earn money working as seamstresses.

Barber was living in the Black Belt when the murder of a young black man at the 31st Street Beach triggered the infamous Chicago Race Riot of 1919. The riot went on for days. She later married and stayed at home to raise her four children. When her husband died in 1949, Barber took a job as a calculator in the Chicago Department of Forestry. She worked for the Forestry Department for thirty-eight years before finally retiring at age eighty-three.

Her four children rated as Barber's greatest successes. All four of her children went on to earn advanced college degrees and worked as teachers. The oldest, Shirley Dillard, worked as a teacher and assistant principal before retiring. Daughter Barbara Bonner was a teacher of special education before her death. Barber's only son, Vaughn Barber, taught school before earning a law degree and starting his own firm, from which he retired. The youngest of Barber's children, Beverly Martin, was a retired teacher who taught at Truman College and DePaul University.

Barber and her family were members of the NAACP. She was an excellent seamstress before her diminished vision forced her to give up sewing, and she also enjoyed gardening and tending to her roses. A devoted Catholic, Irma Barber was a member of St. Thomas the Apostle Catholic Church.

Barber passed away on February 17, 2004 at age 99.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Irma Josephine Barber was conducted by Larry Crowe on March 18, 2003 and March 26, 2003, in Chicago, Illinois, and was recorded on 7 Betacame SP videocassettes. City government employee and seamstress Irma Josephine Barber (1904 - 2004) lived in Chicago for over eighty years, where she worked for the Department of Forestry.

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:

Barber, Irma Josephine, 1904-2004

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews
Barber, Irma Josephine, 1904-2004--Interviews

Government employees--Interviews

Urban elderly--Illinois--Chicago--Interviews

Women tailors--Interviews

Older African Americans--Illinois--Chicago--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Chicago (Ill.)

Occupations:

City Government Employee

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 Irma Josephine Barber, March 18, 2003 and March 26, 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 Irma Josephine Barber, Section A2003_051_001_001, TRT: 0:29:09 ?

Irma Josephine Barber was born on March 13, 1904 in New Orleans, Louisiana. Her mother, Albertine Boucree Mason, was born in 1870 and came from a Creole family in New Orleans. She played piano and gave lessons in addition to sewing. Barber's father, Jefferson Mason, was from Mississippi and was employed as a cistern operator. She remembers that he often took her and her siblings to visit his mother. Barber and her siblings were raised in New Orleans prior to their father's death. Their neighborhood was primarily African American, but Barber remembers a Dutch family that lived on her block who she was close friends with. Her grandmother also lived nearby, across a large yard of fruit trees. Barber recalls the foods she ate as a child: beans, gumbo, grits, salt pork, and fish. As a child, she attended Catholic churches, where blacks sat in the back, and St. Dominic Catholic School. She recalls her childhood hobbies, which included sewing clothes for her dolls.

Government employees--Interviews.

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

Women tailors--Interviews.

Older African Americans--Illinois--Chicago--Interviews.

Video Oral History Interview with Irma Josephine Barber, Section A2003_051_001_002, TRT: 0:30:06 ?

Irma Josephine Barber was raised in New Orleans, Louisiana. She remembers going to Mardi Gras parades with her father and the music and foods of her childhood. Barber was interested in her education as a child and dreamed of becoming a nun. Her father died when she was six years old and she left school at fourteen years old when her family moved to Chicago, Illinois to the Black Belt on the South Side. Barber found work at a raincoat factory with her sister and aunt. Because she was only fourteen and not permitted to work, she had to hide during inspections. Barber describes her memories of 35th Street in Chicago, which was lined with businesses, including barber and beauty shops. She and her family attended church at St. Monica and later St. Elizabeth, which were both black Catholic parishes on the South Side. Though, Barber thought Chicago was better than New Orleans, she still noticed the segregation of the city.

Video Oral History Interview with Irma Josephine Barber, Section A2003_051_001_003, TRT: 0:30:29 ?

Irma Josephine Barber's mother adopted a young girl following a smallpox outbreak in New Orleans, Louisiana. The girl was older than Barber and remained a part of the family her entire life. Barber remembers the horses and streetcars in Chicago, Illinois during the late-1910s and 1920s. Barber met her husband on a streetcar on her way to a church picnic. The couple married at St. Elizabeth's Catholic Church on September 22nd, 1925 and honeymooned several months later in California. Barber's husband was a Fred Harvey waiter, working for the railroad. His route ran nine days from Chicago to Los Angeles, California. Barber speculates that the demands of his job contributed to his early death at the age of fifty-one. She talks about his interests, which included Haiti and reading. As she began to have children, the family moved from her mother's home to Englewood, which was a predominantly Jewish neighborhood at the

time. The nearby Catholic school refused to accept her children due to their race.

Video Oral History Interview with Irma Josephine Barber, Section A2003_051_001_004, TRT: 0:30:09 ?

Irma Josephine Barber's husband was from St. Louis, Missouri. He attended college for one year and was an avid learner. She recalls that he took her on her first visit to the library after their marriage. Though he worked a lot, he was a good parent and did the work to maintain their three-flat apartment building in the Englewood neighborhood of Chicago, Illinois. When he was fifty-one years old, Barber's husband passed away from hypertension and kidney problems after several months of illness. After her husband's death, Barber supported her family by working at the public bath houses, where she was charged with managing the water while residents took baths. She then began to work for the City of Chicago as a secretary for the Bureau of Forestry, where she remained for forty years. Barber has four children; her three daughters are teachers and her son is a lawyer.

Video Oral History Interview with Irma Josephine Barber, Section A2003_051_001_005, TRT: 0:29:08 ?

Irma Josephine Barber recalls seeing two people killed during the riots in Chicago, Illinois in 1919. She moved out of the Englewood neighborhood of Chicago in the 1970s, and retired from the City of Chicago Bureau of Forestry at eighty-four years old. Barber describes working under the Daley administration and considers the prospects of having an African American or Hispanic mayor of Chicago in the future. She talks about her family and her concerns for young African Americans. Barber was a devout Catholic throughout her life and reflects on the role of religion in her life. She shares her secrets for maintaining her health, reflects upon her achievements and describes how she would like to be remembered.

Video Oral History Interview with Irma Josephine Barber, Section A2003_051_002_006, TRT: 0:30:30 ?

Irma Josephine Barber recalls an issue with family land in Mississippi during her childhood. Barber's paternal grandfather, left Barber's father land when he passed. Authorities assumed Barber's father was white, because her paternal grandmother was very light and looked white. The authorities refused to give the land to Barber's mother who was brown-skinned. Barber describes segregation on the streetcars in New Orleans, Louisiana during her childhood and remembers being forced to stand on a segregated train in the 1950s because the only available seats were in the white section. Barber's faith, diet, and exercise were keys to her longevity. She concludes by narrating her photographs.

Video Oral History Interview with Irma Josephine Barber, Section A2003_051_002_007, TRT: 0:07:29 ?

Irma Josephine Barber narrates her photographs.