

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Chester Blair

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Blair, Chester, 1928-2015
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Chester Blair,
Dates:	April 2, 2003
Bulk Dates:	2003
Physical Description:	7 Betacame SP videocassettes (3:10:42).
Abstract:	Trial lawyer Chester Blair (1928 - 2015) was the first black head of the Chicago Bar Association. Blair was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on April 2, 2003, in Chicago, Illinois. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2003_062
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Attorney Chester L. Blair was born in Streetman, Texas on July 2, 1928. Blair left home at an early age to seek greater opportunity in the state of Washington. After falling ill from manual labor, Blair returned to Texas to complete high school. Deciding that he wanted to become a lawyer, he arrived in Chicago in April 1947 with a letter of introduction to the famous lawyer Euclid Taylor.

After working as a busboy and attending Fisk University for one year, Blair was hired by the post office and transferred to Chicago State University. He received his B.Ed. in 1952 and taught for the Chicago Public Schools for seven years. While teaching, he pursued master's level work at Roosevelt University and went on to earn a J.D. in 1959 from the John Marshall Law School, where he excelled in real estate law.

Upon completing his law degree, Blair went into private practice as a partner in Blair & Cole. His practice included criminal defense and personal injury cases. Blair became the first African American president of the Chicago Bar Association.

Throughout his career, Blair had served on numerous advisory committees for the Illinois Supreme Court and the American Bar Association. He was a member and former president of the Cook County Bar Association and a member of both the Illinois State Bar Association and the Illinois Trial Lawyers Association. He served on the boards of the Illinois Institute for Continuing Legal Education and the Chicago Bar Foundation. He was named a fellow of the American Bar Foundation in 1987. Blair had been a lecturer and professor for the Association of Trial Lawyers of America. From 1984 to 1998, he wrote a weekly column for the *Chicago Daily Defender*.

Blair passed away on March 16, 2015 at the age of 86.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Chester Blair was conducted by Larry Crowe on April 2, 2003, in Chicago, Illinois, and was recorded on 7 Betacame SP videocassettes. Trial lawyer Chester Blair (1928 - 2015) was the first black head of the Chicago Bar Association.

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:

- Blair, Chester, 1928-2015
- Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)
- Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

- African Americans--Interviews
 - Blair, Chester, 1928-2015--Interviews
-

Organizations:

- HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)
 - The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection
-

Occupations:

Trial Lawyer

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 Chester Blair, April 2, 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 Chester Blair, Section A2003_062_001_001, TRT: 0:28:35 ?

Chester Blair describes his family background. His mother, Crentslean Thomas, was born around 1904 in Texas. His father, Benny Chester Blair, was born to a Baptist minister around 1903 in Cheneysboro, Texas. Originally named B.C. Blair, he was given the name of “Benny Chester” by military officials after joining the U.S. Army. Benny Blair moved from town to town in Texas and across the West, and met Crentslean Thomas after settling in Streetman, Texas, where Thomas worked as a domestic. The couple gave birth to Chester Blair on July 2, 1928. Blair was raised by his mother, who was a perpetual worrier. The smells, sights, and tastes of Blair’s youth include the smell of fish sandwiches on Fridays; getting water from the creek in a place called the valley; seeing where his uncle hid his corn whiskey in the woods; and tasting corn whiskey for the first time. An inquisitive youth, Blair enjoyed reading books, and started reading

newspapers after he began to deliver them.

Video Oral History Interview with Chester Blair, Section A2003_062_001_002, TRT: 0:29:45 ?

Chester Blair was influenced by a grade school instructor named Miss Livingston, who told him that he could accomplish anything. This statement greatly influenced Blair, as he had few professional role models except for his paternal grandfather, a minister. Blair's grandfather wore suits daily, garnering respect during a time where blacks in Texas were not respected. While working at a grocery store as a youth, Blair helped a white butcher, and the butcher later thanked him. Around 1933, Blair worked a summer construction job and decided he wanted a better life. He lied about his age, and moved to Hanford, Washington where he had a job unloading cement. He later moved to Vanport, Oregon to work as a shipyard "chipper", where he contracted pneumonia. Blair's father later moved with him to Portland, Oregon to re-enroll him in school.

Video Oral History Interview with Chester Blair, Section A2003_062_001_003, TRT: 0:28:21 ?

In 1945, Chester Blair moved to Portland, Oregon to live with his father and attend Jefferson High School, where he joined the men's glee club. On the suggestion of his glee club teacher, Blair's father enrolled Blair in voice classes, and Blair became the lead singer for a group that sang regularly on Portland's KALE radio. Blair then moved to Houston, Texas in 1946 to complete his senior year at Jack Yates High School, graduating from there in 1947. After being refused service at the all-white branch of Houston's public library, Blair left Texas for good, and moved to Chicago, Illinois. Here, Blair was offered a job with the "Chicago Defender" newspaper, but instead worked at a restaurant where he had free meals. During his first week in Chicago, Blair slept in train stations to save money for rent. He enrolled at Fisk University in 1947, but returned to Chicago penniless in 1948 to escape the school's rigid, all-black environment.

Video Oral History Interview with Chester Blair, Section A2003_062_001_004, TRT: 0:29:35 ?

Around 1955, Chester Blair was drafted into the U.S. Army, where he served as a photographer. In 1956, Blair returned to Chicago to attend John Marshall Law School, and graduated from there with his J.D. degree in 1959. Blair then joined the Chicago Bar Association and began in private practice. Blair was appointed as the financial secretary for the 24th Ward Democratic Organization by Benjamin Lewis, the 24th Ward's first black alderman, with whom he shared an office. In 1963, Lewis was brutally murdered in his office, and Blair was the third person on the scene. Lewis was succeeded by U.S. Congressman George Collins, who hired Blair as the 24th Ward's attorney. In 1963, Blair defended 24th Ward election officials against the "Operation Eagle Eye" voter suppression operation in the U.S. Court of Appeals. In 1968, Blair's private practice was destroyed due to the riots following the assassination of Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Weeks later his second office was destroyed by a nearby explosion.

Video Oral History Interview with Chester Blair, Section A2003_062_001_005, TRT: 0:30:05 ?

In 1989, Chester Blair was elected as the first African American president of the Chicago Bar Association. Though Blair had no intentions of running for this position, his friend, attorney Jack Hayes, convinced him to put his name on the ballot. Hayes felt that Blair's accomplishments as a member of the Chicago Bar Association's Board of Managers, and his work with the Illinois Supreme Court, made him an excellent candidate. Blair won the presidential nomination, with each of the sixteen votes cast in his favor. He later ran unopposed, and was elected as president of the Chicago Bar Association, a position that he held until 1990. In 1989, Blair established the Earl B. Dickerson Award to honor African

American attorneys who made contributions to Chicago. Past honorees include Thurgood Marshall, Mayor Harold Washington, and HistoryMakers James Montgomery, John Stroger, and Damon Keith. Blair also talked about his role models: Euclid Taylor, Jack Hayes, and HistoryMakers George Leighton and James Montgomery.

Video Oral History Interview with Chester Blair, Section A2003_062_001_006, TRT: 0:29:56 ?

Chester Blair described how he prepares for his court cases, including selecting a judge; opting for or against a jury; and preparing expert witnesses and his clients to testify. It is imperative that Blair believe his client, and that his client discloses all information to him; otherwise, he will withdraw from the case. Blair also wants to ensure that the prosecutor follows the rules. According to Blair, judges are less likely to send whites to prison because sometimes they fear for whites' safety in a predominantly black environment. This promotes a system of sending blacks to prison disproportionately to that of whites. Blair commented on African Americans' repression of each another, as well as his hopes and concerns for the African American community and his legacy. Blair also described Chicago's restrictive covenant system, Carl Hansberry, and the 1940 Hansberry v. Lee case against restrictive covenants.

Video Oral History Interview with Chester Blair, Section A2003_062_001_007, TRT: 0:14:25 ?

Chester Blair described the 1940 Hansberry v. Lee case. In the 1940s, Carl Hansberry, an African American real estate agent, purchased property in an area of Chicago's South Side that was affected by restrictive covenants. The local homeowner's association attempted to void the sale, and the case was taken to the U.S. Supreme Court in 1940, where the judge ruled in Hansberry's favor. This experience inspired Hansberry's daughter, Lorraine Hansberry, to write the award-winning play, "A Raisin in the Sun," which premiered in New York City on Broadway in 1959. Blair talks about how he would like to be remembered, and closes the interview by narrating his photographs.