

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with The Honorable Russell B. Sugarmon

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Sugarmon, Russell B., Jr.
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Russell B. Sugarmon,
Dates:	July 28, 2003
Bulk Dates:	2003
Physical Description:	7 Betacame SP videocassettes (3:09:47).
Abstract:	Municipal court judge The Honorable Russell B. Sugarmon (1929 - 2019) served on the Tennessee Democratic Party Executive Committee; the Tennessee State Senate, as a referee in Memphis Juvenile Court system, and on the General Sessions bench. Sugarmon was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on July 28, 2003, in Memphis, Tennessee. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2003_148
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Judge Russell B. Sugarmon, Jr., helped reverse the tide of racism in Tennessee during his legal and political career. A native of Memphis, Sugarmon was born on May 11, 1929, and completed his primary education in his hometown.

Following a year at Morehouse University, Sugarmon earned his B.A. degree from Rutgers University in 1950; he then received his J.D. degree from Harvard Law School in 1953. For the next two years, Sugarmon served in the Army, receiving a letter of commendation for his tour of duty in Japan. Upon returning to the United States, Sugarmon did graduate work in finance at Boston University before entering private practice in Memphis in 1956. Sugarmon ran for public works commissioner in 1959 in a racially charged race. As the first African American to make a serious bid for a major city office in Memphis, Sugarmon lost when whites united in opposition to his candidacy; his experience, however, helped pave the way for future black leaders in Memphis.

Sugarmon later became a founding partner in the Memphis law firm of Ratner, Sugarmon, Lucas, Willis and Caldwell. In 1964, Sugarmon was elected to the Tennessee Democratic Party Executive Committee, and two years later ran successfully for the State Senate. From 1976 to 1987, he served as a referee in Memphis Juvenile Court system; Sugarmon stepped down from that post in May 1987 when he was appointed to the General Sessions bench. Sugarmon was elected to the seat in 1988 and was re-elected in 1990 and 1998; by that time, he had become a well-respected elder statesman in Memphis, liked by people of all races and political affiliations.

Sugarmon was an active member of several civic and community groups, including the NAACP and ACLU; he was honored by both organizations for his pioneering efforts and contributions to Memphis. Sugarmon has four children with his first wife, Miriam, and two stepchildren with his present wife, Regina. He also has seven grandchildren and a great-granddaughter.

Sugarmon passed away on February 18, 2019.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with The Honorable Russell B. Sugarmon was conducted by Larry Crowe on July 28, 2003, in Memphis, Tennessee, and was recorded on 7 Betacame SP videocassettes. Municipal court judge The Honorable Russell B. Sugarmon (1929 - 2019) served on the Tennessee Democratic Party Executive Committee; the Tennessee State Senate, as a referee in Memphis Juvenile Court system, and on the General Sessions bench.

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:

Sugarmon, Russell B., Jr.

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Sugarmon, Russell B., Jr.--Interviews

African American civil rights workers--Interviews

African American judges--Interviews

African American political activists--Interviews

African American politicians--Interviews

Memphis (Tenn.)

Childhood

African American families

African Americans--Genealogy

School sports

Football players

African American young men

African American youth

Harvard Law School

Morehouse College (Atlanta, Ga.)

Rutgers University

College sports.

United States--Armed Forces--African Americans

Southern States--Social life and customs

Mississippi--Politics and government.

Civil rights movement

Kennedy, Robert F., 1925-1968

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Municipal 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 Russell B. Sugarmon, July 28, 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 Russell B. Sugarmon, Section A2003_148_001_001, TRT: 0:28:26 ?

Judge Russell Sugarmon describes his family background and his childhood growing up in Memphis, Tennessee. Sugarmon discusses the many branches of his family's ethnicities, and recalls the personalities of his mother and father. Sugarmon then describes his childhood neighborhood and his favorite activities. Sugarmon also talks about his high school football career, which allowed him to travel around the South.

African American civil rights workers--Interviews.
African American judges--Interviews.
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Memphis (Tenn.).
Children.
African American families.
African Americans--Genealogy.
School sports.
Football players.
African American young men.
African American youth.
Harvard Law School.
Morehouse College (Atlanta, Ga.).
Rutgers University.
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African American soldiers.
Southern States--Social life and customs.
Mississippi--Politics and government.
Civil rights movements.
Kennedy, Robert F., 1925-1968.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Russell B. Sugarmon, Section
A2003_148_001_002, TRT: 0:29:24 ?

Judge Russell Sugarmon discusses the political climate in Memphis, Tennessee, during the first half of the 20th Century, and takes time to remember some of his favorite teachers from high school. Sugarmon talks about his educational aspirations, and how he used his success in high school to gain admittance to Morehouse College, and later Harvard University Law School. Sugarmon explains how his mischief at Morehouse led to his enrollment at Rutgers University. Sugarmon then shares many amusing anecdotes from his time at Rutgers.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Russell B. Sugarmon, Section
A2003_148_001_003, TRT: 0:28:59 ?

Judge Russell Sugarmon describes his experience at Rutgers University, recalling one of his favorite memories from his time on the football team, as well as an acclaimed academic paper he wrote there. Sugarmon then recounts his time at Harvard University Law School, remembering influential classmates and professors, and describing the intellectual environment. Sugarmon explains why he chose to join the Army after getting his law degree and details his tour of duty in Japan.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Russell B. Sugarmon, Section
A2003_148_001_004, TRT: 0:29:35 ?

Judge Russell Sugarmon details his first experiences in the politics of Memphis, Tennessee. He describes his run for public works commissioner of Memphis, his first foray into politics. After that campaign, he turned his attention to helping black voters consolidate their strength and make a statewide impact in elections. Sugarmon explains how the Tennessee Voters Council formed, and discusses the council's influence in subsequent elections, particularly the 1959 Tennessee

gubernatorial election, which affected national politics.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Russell B. Sugarmon, Section
A2003_148_001_005, TRT: 0:29:00 ?

Judge Russell Sugarmon details his involvement in the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. Sugarmon describes his efforts in election reform and voting reform in Memphis, Tennessee, and evaluates the impact of civil rights workers in Mississippi during the Mississippi Freedom Summer of 1964. Sugarmon discusses his efforts to reform the delegation process at two Democratic National Conventions, and offers his thoughts on the politics of Robert F. Kennedy.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Russell B. Sugarmon, Section
A2003_148_001_006, TRT: 0:28:52 ?

Judge Russell Sugarmon discusses two memorable incidents that occurred during his civil rights work in the 1960s, and transitions into a discussion about his career as a judge. Sugarmon uses examples of cases on which he has ruled to illustrate the financial and educational problems in the state of Tennessee, as well as express his concerns for the black community. Sugarmon then reflects on his life and considers how he'd like to be remembered.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Russell B. Sugarmon, Section
A2003_148_001_007, TRT: 0:15:31 ?

Russell B. Sugarmon narrates his photographs.