

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Ralph Gardner-Chavis

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Gardner-Chavis, Ralph, 1922-2018
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Ralph Gardner-Chavis,
Dates:	March 19, 2004
Bulk Dates:	2004
Physical Description:	7 Betacame SP videocassettes (3:08:27).
Abstract:	Chemistry professor and chemist Ralph Gardner-Chavis (1922 - 2018) was a research assistant for the Manhattan Project before working as a chemist for the Standard Oil Company and teaching chemistry at Cleveland State University. Gardner-Chavis was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on March 19, 2004, in Cleveland, Ohio. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2004_030
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Chemist and chemistry professor Ralph Gardner-Chavis was born on December 3, 1922 in Cleveland, Ohio to Vivian Hicks Gardner, a teacher and housewife, and Clarence Chavis Gardner, a musician and government worker. Gardner-Chavis was educated in the Cleveland Public School system. He attended Bolton Elementary School and Audubon Junior High School. Gardner-Chavis graduated from John Adams High School in 1939 and went on to earn his bachelor's degree in chemistry from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in 1943. He completed his graduate studies at Western Reserve University in Cleveland, Ohio, earning both his master's and Ph.D. degrees in chemistry in 1952 and 1959, respectively.

In order to avoid fighting in World War II, Gardner-Chavis took a job as a research assistant on the Manhattan Project between 1943 and 1947. The project resulted in the United States developing the atomic bomb to end the war in 1945. Immediately after leaving this position, Gardner-Chavis was unable to find a job as a chemist, so he worked as a waiter from 1947 to 1949. He was eventually hired as a research chemist and project leader at the Standard Oil Company in Ohio where he remained for almost twenty years. Gardner-Chavis then took a teaching position in Cleveland State University's chemistry department where he held a full-time faculty position from 1968 to 1985. As a professor, Gardner-Chavis had an interest in early childhood learning and development, and he started a program with his adult students that advocated reading to babies. He fought for the inclusion of black studies and multi-racial courses in the curriculum at CSU. Gardner-Chavis later combined his part-time teaching with work in the research lab of the Molecular Technology Corporation, where he was also on the board of directors and served as vice president of research. Gardner-Chavis went on to hold emeritus status in the CSU chemistry department while continuing his research on catalysis and molecular technology.

Throughout his career as a chemist, Gardner-Chavis published numerous research articles. He became a member of the Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity in 1942 and the American Institute of Chemical Engineers (AIChE) in 2001.

Gardner-Chavis passed away on March 27, 2018 at age 95.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Ralph Gardner-Chavis was conducted by Regennia Williams on March 19, 2004, in Cleveland, Ohio, and was recorded on 7 Betacame SP videocassettes. Chemistry professor and chemist Ralph Gardner-Chavis (1922 - 2018) was a research assistant for the Manhattan Project before working as a chemist for the Standard Oil Company and teaching chemistry at Cleveland State University.

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:

Gardner-Chavis, Ralph, 1922-2018

Williams, Regennia (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Gardner-Chavis, Ralph, 1922-2018--Interviews

African American chemists--Interviews.

African American college teachers--Interviews.

African American scientists--Interviews.

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Chemist

HistoryMakers® Category:

ScienceMakers

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 Ralph Gardner-Chavis, March 19, 2004. 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 Ralph Gardner-Chavis, Section A2004_030_001_001, TRT: 0:28:32 ?

Ralph Gardner-Chavis talks about his parents. His mother, Vivian Elizabeth Hicks, was born in Columbia, Missouri in 1899 to Annie and Alex Hicks. She attended the University of Illinois where she met Gardner-Chavis' father, Clarence Chavis Gardner. He was born in Indianapolis, Indiana to Mary Anne Chavis and attended Buffalo University and later, Western Reserve University. Gardner-Chavis talks about his father's involvement and interest in jazz music. He discusses his childhood in Buffalo, New York and his Cleveland, Ohio neighborhood, where his family moved when he was eight years old. Gardner-Chavis attended Bolton Elementary, Audubon Junior High School, and Adams High School in Cleveland. Gardner-Chavis finishes by explaining that his family coped with the Depression because his father earned money playing music and his mother worked for the Welfare Department.

African American families--New York (State)--Buffalo.

African American families--Ohio--Cleveland.

Jazz musicians.

African Americans--Social life and customs--Ohio--Cleveland.

African Americans--Education (Elementary)--Ohio--Cleveland.

African Americans--Education (Secondary)--Ohio--Cleveland.

Depressions--1929--Ohio--Cleveland.

Video Oral History Interview with Ralph Gardner-Chavis, Section A2004_030_001_002, TRT: 0:28:47 ?

Ralph Gardner-Chavis talks about his education. He shares a story about disliking word problems in junior high math class. Gardner-Chavis graduated from Adams High School in 1939 and took classes at Western Reserve University in Cleveland where he studied chemistry. He later transferred to the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, where he earned his bachelor's degree in 1943. Gardner-Chavis remembers how his opposition to joining the Army after college resulted in his recruitment to the Manhattan Project, which developed the atomic bomb. He was forced to place himself in an industry essential to the war effort in order to avoid fighting. Gardner-Chavis details the science and the method behind building the bomb and discusses some of the political issues surrounding the bomb during the latter stages of World War II.

African Americans--Education (Secondary)--Ohio--Cleveland.

African American college students--Illinois--Urbana.

Chemistry--Study and teaching.

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

World War, 1939-1945--Participation, African American.

Manhattan Project (U.S.).

Atomic bomb--Testing.

World War, 1939-1945--Science.

World War, 1939-1945--Political aspects--United States.

Video Oral History Interview with Ralph Gardner-Chavis, Section A2004_030_001_003, TRT: 0:28:44 ?

Ralph Gardner-Chavis describes the atmosphere in Chicago while he was working on the Manhattan Project at the end of World War II. He worked simultaneously for Carroll Printing Company, which was run by the family of a

college friend. Gardner-Chavis discusses the United States' decision to drop the bomb on Japan and remembers that many of his colleagues did not agree with the decision. He reflects on the scientific, cultural, and political impacts of the atomic bomb. In 1949, Gardner-Chavis began working for Standard Oil of Ohio, after several years of waiting tables. That same year, he began catalysis research in graduate school at Western Reserve University where he earned his master's degree in 1952 and his Ph.D. degree in 1959. Gardner-Chavis married Frances Christine Bailey, and they had a son, Ralph A. Gardner, Jr.

World War, 1939-1945--Participation, African American.

Manhattan Project (U.S.).

Atomic bomb--Testing.

World War, 1939-1945--Science.

World War, 1939-1945--Political aspects--United States.

Standard Oil Company.

African Americans--Marriage.

African American families--Ohio--Cleveland.

Chemistry--Study and teaching.

African American college students--Ohio-Cleveland.

Western Reserve University.

Video Oral History Interview with Ralph Gardner-Chavis, Section A2004_030_001_004, TRT: 0:29:41 ?

Ralph Gardner-Chavis describes his work and his supervisor at Standard Oil of Ohio (SOHIO). His research focused on using infrared spectroscopy to measure the vibration frequencies of gas molecules interacting with surfaces of solids. Gardner-Chavis describes the work, which ultimately led to his Ph.D. thesis in 1958. He defended his dissertation and earned his Ph.D. in 1959. Gardner-Chavis then describes repeated incidents with a racist supervisor at SOHIO who refused to make him a project leader even though Gardner-Chavis was performing his duties well. In May of 1968, Gardner-Chavis was chosen to present one of his publications at the Fourth International Congress of Catalysis in Moscow, however his bosses at SOHIO would not support him and wanted to send someone else instead. Gardner-Chavis eventually quit SOHIO and went to the conference of his own accord.

Standard Oil Company.

Discrimination in employment.

African American chemists.

Chemistry--Research.

Chemistry--Study and teaching.

Catalysis--Congresses.

Video Oral History Interview with Ralph Gardner-Chavis, Section A2004_030_001_005, TRT: 0:29:42 ?

Ralph Gardner-Chavis talks about his foray into business. He founded the American Dream Soap Company upon his return from a conference in Moscow, but it only lasted for a couple of years. Additionally, in 1968, Gardner-Chavis was hired by Cleveland State University as an associate professor of chemistry. Gardner-Chavis talks about his interest in early childhood learning and development. He started a program with his adult students, based on his research, that advocated reading to babies in order to cause positive development. Gardner-Chavis also fought for the inclusion of black studies and

multi-racial courses in the curriculum at Cleveland State University. He finishes by talking about his struggle to be promoted to full professor. In 1981, Gardner-Chavis prepared his catalysis research dossier along with student evaluations, but the document and his promotion were unanimously rejected.

College teachers--Ohio--Cleveland.

Cleveland State University.

Early childhood education--Study and teaching.

Chemistry--Study and teaching.

African Americans--Study and teaching.

College teachers--Promotion.

Video Oral History Interview with Ralph Gardner-Chavis, Section A2004_030_001_006, TRT: 0:29:46 ?

Ralph Gardner-Chavis continues to describe his unsuccessful bid to be promoted to full professor at Cleveland State University. The Personnel Action Committee of the chemistry department questioned his research results and refused to acknowledge the validity of his catalysis research. Gardner-Chavis then discusses his move in 1985 to a private firm where he continued his research. He worked for a company called Molecular Technology Corporation, but he was forced to declare bankruptcy when the company's president stole money and fled. Around 1993, Gardner-Chavis returned to Cleveland State University where he continued his research. Gardner-Chavis finishes by reflecting on his life and career, summarizing his groundbreaking research on catalysis, reading a poem he wrote and sharing his concerns about the future of humanity.

College teachers--Ohio--Cleveland.

College teachers--Promotion.

Chemistry--Research.

Chemistry--Study and teaching.

Video Oral History Interview with Ralph Gardner-Chavis, Section A2004_030_001_007, TRT: 0:13:15 ?

Ralph Gardner-Chavis describes his photographs