

Biographical Description for The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Charles Stewart, III

PERSON

Stewart, Charles, III, 1910-2006

Alternative Names: Charles Stewart, III;

Life Dates: August 7, 1910-February 13, 2006

Place of Birth: Tuscaloosa, Alabama, USA

Work: Chicago, Illinois

Occupations: Labor Activist

Biographical Note

Electrician and organizer Charles Vernon Stewart was born August 7, 1910, in Tuscaloosa, Alabama. Raised in Omaha, Nebraska, and Chicago, Illinois, Stewart attended Dore Elementary School, Phillips High School and was the first African American admitted into Greer College, a trade school for electricians. Determined to succeed, Stewart, at eleven years of age, alongside his stepfather, Sam Taylor, formed an underground educational effort to learn the trade of electricians, a trade that blacks were not allowed to practice. Stewart and Taylor had a Greek friend who helped them by ordering electrical home study magazines for them because the publishers refused to mail copies to blacks. The group successfully completed each test they took and soon began working alongside other black electricians in Chicago. In 1922, Stewart helped his stepfather establish Taylor Electric Company, and in 1927, he graduated from Greer College.

In 1929, black electricians in Illinois were not allowed to join the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers Local Union 134. Competing white electricians often vandalized Stewart's and other black electricians' electrical jobs at night, forcing them to redo their work at their own expense. As a result, Stewart helped organize twenty other black electricians, and together they persuaded U.S. Congressman Oscar DePriest and a black state senator to grant them a charter that permitted them to legally practice as electricians, contract for electrical jobs, and legally stopped white electricians from destroying black electricians' work. Stewart and his associates formed the first black electrical union in the United States. In 1943, the government forced the Local Union 134 to desegregate by making three percent of their members black. Stewart and his stepfather were among those who left the black union (primarily because the black union was not allowed to bid on major electrical contracts) to desegregate Local Union 134.

Stewart was hired by Berry Electric in 1942 and soon became the first black foreman for one of the largest electrical contractors in Chicago. Stewart built a racially integrated team of electricians capable of completing large jobs, such as the Jewell Grand Bazaar. Stewart also built the electrical source box for the River Oaks Shopping Mall in Calumet City, Illinois. Stewart, who retired from Berry Electric after thirty-seven years, remained a resident of Chicago's south side.

Charles Stewart passed away on February 13, 2006 at the age of ninety-five.

Related Entries

Greer College [STUDENTOF]
[from ? to ?]

Wendell Phillips Academy High School [STUDENTOF]
[from ? to ?]

Dore Elementary School [STUDENTOF]
[from ? to ?]

Howard Kennedy Elementary School [STUDENTOF]
[from ? to ?]

Berry Electric Contract Company [EMPLOYEEOF]
[from ? to ?]

Foreman

Taylor Electric Company [EMPLOYEEOF]
[from ? to ?]

Electrician

9632 [MEMBEROF]
[from ? to ?]

IBEW Local 134 [MEMBEROF]
[from 1943 to ?]