

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Muriel W. Foster

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Foster, Muriel W., 1931-
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Muriel W. Foster,
Dates:	December 14, 2004 and January 9, 2005
Bulk Dates:	2004 and 2005
Physical Description:	7 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:58:51).
Abstract:	Dance instructor Muriel W. Foster (1931 -) is the director of the Sammy Dyer School of Theatre and a former member of the 1950s dance group, The Dyerettes. Foster was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on December 14, 2004 and January 9, 2005, in Chicago, Illinois. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2004_261
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Dance instructor and arts administrator Muriel Foster was born Muriel Burns, January 16, 1931 in Chicago, Illinois. Her mother, Hattie was from Dayton, Ohio and her father, William D. Burns, a veteran vaudevillian and one of the Four Harmony Kings, was from Denver, Colorado. Foster started dance instructions at age four with Sadie Bruce. In 1941, she enrolled in the school of her father's friend from "Shuffle Along" Sammy Dyer. She attended Carter Elementary School and while still in school Foster and four of her friends, Shirley Hall, Jean Cornell, Clarice White, and Gloria Broussard started performing as the sensational "Dyerettes." Under Dyer's tutelage, Foster still graduated from DuSable High School in 1948 all the while still performing with Sammy Davis, Jr., Nat King Cole, Benny Green, Ruth Brown, Roy Hamilton, Tito Puente, Billy Eckstine and other greats. Earning an A.A. degree from Wilson Junior College in 1951, Foster continued to tour the United States and Canada. Known for their polished professionalism and unexpected acrobatics, the Dyerettes performed at the Club DeLisa, the Lafayette Theatre and the Apollo Theatre.

Foster married Bobby Wilson, a baseball player with the Dodgers, in 1955 and continued to perform through 1956. However, as other members got married, the Dyerettes retired. Divorced, Foster worked in the Personnel Department at Wieboldt's Department Stores in Chicago until the stores went bankrupt in 1988. Since 1988, Foster has been Human Resources coordinator for Chicago's Merchandise Mart, but, despite a full career, Foster has actively supported the Sammy Dyer School of Theatre. Over the years the school has produced performers like George Patterson, Tedd Levy, Brill Barrett and Geraldine Johnson. When Mr. Dyer away passed in 1960, Dyerette, Shirley Hall directed the school from 1960 to 1998. Foster has been the director of the school since 1998.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Muriel W. Foster was conducted by Larry Crowe on December 14, 2004 and

January 9, 2005, in Chicago, Illinois, and was recorded on 7 Betacame SP videocassettes. Dance instructor Muriel W. Foster (1931 -) is the director of the Sammy Dyer School of Theatre and a former member of the 1950s dance group, The Dyerettes.

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:

Foster, Muriel W., 1931-

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Foster, Muriel W., 1931---Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Dance Instructor

HistoryMakers® Category:

ArtMakers

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 Muriel W. Foster, December 14, 2004 and January 9, 2005. 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 Muriel W. Foster, Section A2004_261_001_001, TRT: 0:29:30 ?

Muriel W. Foster was born on January 16, 1931 in Chicago, Illinois to Hattie Ellis Burns and William Burns. Her mother was born in 1894 and grew up on a farm in Dayton, Ohio. Foster's maternal grandfather met her maternal grandmother in Akron, Ohio after moving from West Virginia. Her mother came to Chicago at age twenty and worked in a coffee shop where she met Foster's father. Her father was born in 1889 in Denver, Colorado. His parents migrated from Georgia after the Civil War. Foster's father began his vaudeville career at seventeen years old. Performing with Sammy Dyer, Ethel Waters, Thaddeus and Slocum, Sophie Tucker, he also appeared at the Palace Theatre in New York, New York. In addition, he wrote music himself. In 1937, after leaving show business, her father became the first African American Standard Fuel Oil

salesman in Chicago. While growing up on Chicago's South Side, Foster was encouraged by her father to perform, and he enrolled her at Sadie Bruce Glover's dance school and in voice lessons.

Video Oral History Interview with Muriel W. Foster, Section A2004_261_001_002, TRT: 0:28:50 ?

Muriel W. Foster attended William W. Carter Elementary School in Chicago, Illinois, where she enjoyed writing, even though she was once required to rewrite an essay in class as the teacher did not believe she had done it herself. She learned to swim at Carter, which was the only grammar school on the South Side with a pool. She enrolled at the Sammy Dyer School of the Theatre in 1941. Her father introduced her to Ethel Waters, who gave her the nickname Little Burns. At DuSable High School, Foster joined the cheerleading squad and the choir and was influenced by a teacher who knew her father when he was a boy in Denver, Colorado. At age fourteen, Foster began dancing professionally with a group that would come to be known as the Dyerettes. They performed at servicemen's centers and at National Association for the Advancement of Colored People functions. The Dyerettes often appeared with Sammy Davis, Jr., who became Foster's close friend. Foster was the only one of her father's children to enter show business.

Video Oral History Interview with Muriel W. Foster, Section A2004_261_001_003, TRT: 0:29:10 ?

Muriel W. Foster and the Dyerettes were mentored by director Sammy Dyer who shielded them from exploitation as young performers. Foster's first professional show was in Chicago, Illinois. The Dyerettes soon began touring and were required to obtain permission from the board of education and a chaperone because of their young ages. The group became close friends and avoided tensions by respecting each other's roles and abilities. Shirley Hall was the choreographic director, Clarice White the comedian and Jeannie Cornell the star gymnast. Foster performed with the Dyerettes at the Apollo Theatre in New York, New York. The Dyerettes' act incorporated tap, jazz, gymnastics and comedy. The group danced in 'The Swing Mikado,' their only opera. Foster's father was offered a leading role in the show but turned it down. Foster attended Woodrow Wilson Junior College in Chicago, graduating in 1951. In 1955, she married baseball player Bobby Wilson and stopped dancing the following year; she had her first child in 1957.

Video Oral History Interview with Muriel W. Foster, Section A2004_261_001_004, TRT: 0:29:10 ?

Muriel W. Foster began touring with the Dyerettes full time in 1951. The group spent ten weeks in Hawaii performing at an open-air nightclub near Hickam Air Force Base, where they met Mel Torme. Foster appeared with Count Basie, Duke Ellington, the Four Tops and other popular musicians. The Dyerettes became known as an excellent opening act. One of the highlights of Foster's performing career was when the Dyerettes received a police escort when they performed at the policemen's ball at the Hotel Astor in New York, New York. While touring the South, Foster encountered segregation for the first time. She was stopped by the police in Atlanta, Georgia for wearing shorts and barred from entering a movie theater. She drew on her father's lessons to deal with racism. But, Foster was welcomed at an all-white Christian Scientist church in Mississippi. Foster worked at a book factory following a back injury until she was able to dance again. In 1956, she left show business in order to start her family.

Video Oral History Interview with Muriel W. Foster, Section A2004_261_001_005, TRT: 0:25:30 ?

Muriel W. Foster, after leaving the Dyerettes, travelled briefly with her husband's baseball team then decided to remain in Chicago, Illinois to care for her sons. Foster was briefly replaced with a lookalike Dyerette, but the group

soon dissolved as members left to be married. Foster began teaching at fellow former Dyerette Shirley Hall Bass' dance school in Chicago. Foster divorced her husband in 1965 and obtained a position in the accounting department at Wieboldt Stores. After three years, she was asked to join the human resources department as a personnel manager, where she worked for eighteen years. She took a similar position at Merchandise Mart, where she had been employed for sixteen years at the time of the interview. Foster has directed the Sammy Dyer School of the Theatre since Bass' death. The school obtained a grant in 2004 from the Chicago Office of Fine Arts. Foster talks about how the school is run, its recent move to Hamilton Park Cultural Center in Chicago, and its seventieth anniversary.

Video Oral History Interview with Muriel W. Foster, Section A2004_261_001_006, TRT: 0:26:10 ?

Muriel W. Foster has taught many students at the Sammy Dyer School of the Theatre in Chicago, Illinois who have become professional performers, including Ted Louis Levy, George Patterson, Jr., Bril Barrett, and Frank Alvino Freeman. Many of Foster's students have returned to the school as teachers or to enroll their own children. At the time of the interview, someone at the school was tapped to take over Foster's position when she retired. She was hopeful that the school would remain open for another seventy years while continuing to attract dedicated teachers and students. Foster reflects upon Sammy Dyer's lasting contributions, the school's preservation of his legacy and its future. She describes her hopes and concerns for the African American community and talks about her family. She concludes by reflecting upon her life, legacy and how she would like to be remembered.

Video Oral History Interview with Muriel W. Foster, Section A2004_261_002_007, TRT: 0:10:31 ?

Muriel W. Foster narrates her photographs.