

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with W. Frank Fountain

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers® 1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Fountain, W. Frank, 1944-
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with W. Frank Fountain,
Dates:	January 31, 2005 and May 24, 2005
Bulk Dates:	2005
Physical Description:	11 Betacame SP videocassettes (5:25:05).
Abstract:	Corporate executive W. Frank Fountain (1944 -) was the senior vice president for government affairs for DaimlerChrysler. Fountain was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on January 31, 2005 and May 24, 2005, in Detroit, Michigan. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2005_030
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Born in Brewton, Alabama, on July 17, 1944, W. Frank Fountain, Jr., was the eldest of Willie Frank and Janie Fountain's seven children. The Fountain family ran a small farm in Tunnel Springs, Alabama, where Fountain learned the value of "working hard and working smart;" he brought those skills with him to Hampton University, where he earned his B.A. degree in history and political science in 1966.

From 1966 to 1968, Fountain served as a Peace Corps volunteer in West Bengal, India, where he employed the lessons he had learned on his family's farm to aid in the improvement of agricultural techniques. In India Fountain also worked with craftspeople to extend their base of customers through innovative marketing strategies.

In 1973, Fountain received his M.B.A. from the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School of Business and accepted the position of Investment Analyst at Chrysler Corporation. Over the next twenty years, Fountain rose through the ranks, working in the Corporate Controller's Office, the Treasurer's Office, and the Government Affairs Office in Washington, D.C.

In 1995, Fountain was appointed vice president for government affairs, and in 1998 he became the senior vice president for government affairs for DaimlerChrysler. In this capacity, Fountain was able to combine his academic training with his business experience while he maintained communication between DaimlerChrysler and government officials. Fountain's position also enabled him to exercise his commitment to community service, due to his responsibilities for community relations and educational programs, and his service as president of the DaimlerChrysler Corporation Fund.

Fountain further demonstrated his commitment to service through his activities as chairman of the board for the Corporate Council on Africa, Hampton University, and the Detroit Public Schools Board of Education. Fountain served as vice chairman of the board for the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies; the Detroit Regional Chamber of Commerce; Citizens Research Council of Michigan; and New Detroit, Inc. Fountain was also a board member of Africare; the Wharton School of Business; the Museum of African American History; and the Hudson-

Webber Foundation. For his contributions to society, Fountain was awarded an honorary doctorate of public service from Central Michigan University.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with W. Frank Fountain was conducted by Julieanna L. Richardson on January 31, 2005 and May 24, 2005, in Detroit, Michigan, and was recorded on 11 Betacame SP videocassettes. Corporate executive W. Frank Fountain (1944 -) was the senior vice president for government affairs for DaimlerChrysler.

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:

Fountain, W. Frank, 1944-

Richardson, Julieanna L. (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Fountain, W. Frank, 1944---Interviews

African American businesspeople--Michigan--Interviews.

African American executives--Interviews.

Endowments--Officials and employees--Interviews.

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

DaimlerChrysler

Occupations:

Corporate Executive

HistoryMakers® Category:

BusinessMakers

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 W. Frank Fountain, January 31, 2005 and May 24, 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 W. Frank Fountain, Section A2005_030_001_001, TRT: 0:30:30
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W. Frank Fountain was born on July 17, 1944 in Brewton, Alabama. Fountain's mother, Jannie Hamilton Fountain, had Cherokee ancestry and was raised in Peterman, Alabama by an unwed mother. Fountain's paternal great-greatgrandmother was brought from Africa to the U.S. in 1839 and had three children with the man who enslaved her, Judge Fountain. Acknowledging his enslaved children, Judge Fountain gave farmland to Fountain's greatgrandfather. Fountain's father, Willie Fountain, grew up in Tunnel Springs, Alabama, in an area settled by former slaves. His father acquired a strict work ethic from his upbringing on a farm, which he instilled in Fountain. Both parents moved to Pensacola, Florida, where they met and married. As a young child, Fountain was cared for by a neighbor, Mattie Beck, who taught at Ransom Middle School in Cantonment, Florida. While accompanying Beck to school each morning, he started kindergarten a year early. Fountain lists his six siblings.

African American businesspeople--Michigan--Interviews.

African American executives--Interviews.

Endowments--Officials and employees--Interviews.

Video Oral History Interview with W. Frank Fountain, Section A2005_030_001_002, TRT: 0:30:40
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W. Frank Fountain lived in Pensacola, Florida during his early childhood. His neighbor, Mattie Beck, watched him while he was young and became his educational mentor. His time at Spencer Bibbs Elementary School also instilled an interest in learning. In third grade, Fountain's family moved to Tunnel Springs, Alabama. Though Fountain had visited his grandparents there before, farm life and its steady stream of work was a change. He was expected to plow and fetch firewood and water. At Rosenwald Junior High School, he once led his class in a math lesson and enjoyed studying ancient cultures. As a teenager, he attended Monroe Country Training School, and helped his father build a new house for the family. Listening to the news on the radio each night sparked his interest in the world beyond his small town. Between planting and harvesting seasons, he regularly stayed with relatives in Pensacola and earned money by cutting lawns. He also returned later in life to administer aid for victims of Hurricane Ivan.

Video Oral History Interview with W. Frank Fountain, Section A2005_030_001_003, TRT: 0:26:25
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No interview; camera was rolling during set up

Video Oral History Interview with W. Frank Fountain, Section A2005_030_002_004, TRT: 0:31:16
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W. Frank Fountain's family moved from their temporary quarters near his grandparents closer to his uncle's farm, where Fountain's father helped with the farm work and as a painter for his carpentry business. After completing third grade at Rosenwald Junior High School, Fountain entered Antioch Church School. During that time, he struggled to balance school and family responsibilities. He returned to Rosenwald for sixth through ninth grade. At Monroe County Training School in Beatrice, Alabama, Fountain experienced

classism. An outsider to the black elite, he felt overlooked but used this adversity as motivation to achieve. He was elected junior and senior class president, served on the student council and had several dates for prom. Aware at an early age that college was needed for a professional career, he applied to Hampton Institute in Virginia with the help of his former principal at Rosenwald. Entering Hampton in 1962, he found the campus environment exciting, but had to adapt to more rigorous academics.

Video Oral History Interview with W. Frank Fountain, Section A2005_030_002_005, TRT: 0:31:07
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W. Frank Fountain wanted to pursue a career in the U.S. Foreign Service after reading Ralph Bunche's autobiography in high school. During his undergraduate years at Hampton Institute in Virginia, he participated in civil rights demonstrations, though he had to hide his participation to avoid retaliation from the conservative university administration. He also joined the Fidi Amici social club, majored in history, minored in political science and originally planned to be a teacher. Though he showed promise while student teaching his senior year, Fountain decided he was not interested in education. Reading 'The Ugly American' and J. Edgar Hoover's 'Masters of Deceit' further stimulated his interest in foreign policy, and he decided to become a U.S. Foreign Service officer. After learning about the Peace Corps, Fountain decided to volunteer as a way to prepare for a career abroad and to address his concerns about U.S. foreign policy.

Video Oral History Interview with W. Frank Fountain, Section A2005_030_002_006, TRT: 0:31:15
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W. Frank Fountain was challenged academically at Hampton Institute and found the campus environment disciplined yet supportive. He entered the Peace Corps in 1966, during the early years of the organization. Though he hoped to be assigned to Thailand given his interest in Southeast Asia, he was instead sent to Burdwan, India. In the wake of India's recent famine, he encouraged local farmers to grow a high-yield strain of rice. His years spent working on his family farm in Tunnel Springs, Alabama prepared him for the agricultural work he encountered in India and earned him respect from the locals. At the end of his two-year term, Fountain was more successful than his other colleagues in convincing farmers to plant the new rice. He and a fellow Peace Corps member also developed a plan to train new recruits and reduce attrition. They both flew back to California to train the next group of volunteers, but when the Peace Corps stipulated that only one could return to India, Fountain stayed behind.

Video Oral History Interview with W. Frank Fountain, Section A2005_030_002_007, TRT: 0:30:32
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W. Frank Fountain, while working with the Peace Corps in India, asked consulate officers for advice in gaining an ambassadorship. Informed that he would need to curry favor with the president via large campaign contributions, Fountain turned his focus from the U.S. Foreign Service to business. Fountain declined a job with USAID in Vietnam, instead working with TransCentury Corporation to assist farming co-ops in Mississippi. After deciding that a career in business might yield the finances to win an ambassadorial appointment, he applied to the Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia since his boss was an alumni. Although business school was challenging, Fountain obtained his M.B.A. degree in 1973. He chose to work for Chrysler Corporation due to its relatively high proportion of African American employees. Fountain reflects on being among the earliest black business graduates from elite schools and how his Peace Corps work and door-to-door sales job as a teenager prepared

him for business.

Video Oral History Interview with W. Frank Fountain, Section A2005_030_002_008, TRT: 0:31:12
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W. Frank Fountain, early in his career at Chrysler Corporation, founded a middle-management executive mentorship group that met regularly to discuss their professional goals, challenges and growth within the company. When one of the group members left finance to work in sales and marketing, he recommended Fountain as his replacement. Other than Fountain, the group was entirely white males. Fountain speaks of this lack of diversity in business, but notes the rise in influential black business leaders. He shares his thoughts on how the business world can empower African Americans and how black business leaders can acquire economic power. Fountain names successful African American alumnae from Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania, which includes investment banker Milton Irvin, Exxon executive Freda Bass, and HistoryMaker Larry Bailey. Fountain explains how he managed to advance in his career without a traditional mentor and offers his thoughts on succeeding in business.

Video Oral History Interview with W. Frank Fountain, Section A2005_030_002_009, TRT: 0:31:14
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W. Frank Fountain had just transferred to the Chrysler Corporation assembly plant in Hamtramck, Michigan when the auto industry was hit by the economic downturn in 1974. Even after being laid off, Fountain continued working, and eventually obtained a new finance position in the Service and Parts division. He was selected to work on a business plan assessment for Chrysler's president, but this led to tension with his supervisors. Fountain's reports predicted that Chrysler's serious financial problems were dire, but he was ignored by his bosses. This negligence led to the Chrysler Corporation's near-bankruptcy and government bailout in 1979. Though the business prospered in the 1980s with the creation of the minivan, it began to struggle again in the early 1990s. Fountain talks about Lee Iacocca's tenure at the company, including his leadership during the time of the bailout, and explains Chrysler's timeline for producing a new line of vehicles.

Video Oral History Interview with W. Frank Fountain, Section A2005_030_002_010, TRT: 0:30:30
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W. Frank Fountain transferred to Washington, D.C. to work as executive director of government affairs for DaimlerChrysler. Lobbying proved to be a newfound challenge, but Fountain was able to communicate the company's concerns effectively. In 1995, he was appointed vice president of government affairs for DaimlerChrysler, having survived Chrysler's merger with DaimlerBenz AG. As vice president and then senior vice president of government affairs, Fountain was responsible for the company's philanthropic operations and used his financial knowledge in his work with the DaimlerChrysler Corporation Fund. Fountain traveled to Zimbabwe with Reverend Leon Sullivan, and eventually served as chair on the board of Corporate Council on Africa. He also implemented plans to improve the Detroit Public School system, including opening a new performing arts school. Fountain shares his ideas about economic and financial empowerment for the black community.

Video Oral History Interview with W. Frank Fountain, Section A2005_030_002_011, TRT: 0:20:24
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W. Frank Fountain joined the Executive Leadership Council when it was founded in 1986 by Alvaro Martins. The group brought together a community of

highranking black executives to counsel and support each other in the majoritywhite American business world. At the time of its founding, it was the only organization of its kind that existed for African American corporate executives. Fountain believes the Executive Leadership Council has been successful due to the efforts of its leaders and members, including Carl Brooks and HistoryMaker Dr. Price Cobbs, and he hopes it will continue to provide mentorship and leadership training to young executives. Fountain reflects upon his legacy of positively impacting young African Americans in senior management positions. He hopes to be remembered not only for his success in the corporate world, but as someone who used that success to make a positive difference in the African American community.