

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Robert "Buck" Brown

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Brown, Buck
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Robert "Buck" Brown,
Dates:	January 20, 2007
Bulk Dates:	2007
Physical Description:	7 Betacame SP videocassettes (3:28:34).
Abstract:	Painter and cartoonist Robert "Buck" Brown (1936 - 2007) was well-known for his "Granny" cartoon, which appeared in Playboy magazine. His other works ran in the Chicago Sun-Times, Ebony, Jet, The New Yorker and other publications. Brown was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on January 20, 2007, in University Park, Illinois. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2007_022
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Cartoonist and painter, Robert “Buck” Brown was born Bobby Brown on February 3, 1936 in the “Browntown” suburb of Morrison, Tennessee. His parents, Doris Lemmings Brown and WPA worker Michael Fate Brown, separated when Brown was five years old. Moving to Chicago, Brown attended A.O. Sexton Elementary School and Englewood High School. At Englewood, Brown placed second in an art contest where the winner was sculptor, Richard Hunt. Brown graduated from Englewood High School in 1954. In 1955, Brown joined the United States Air Force and gained notoriety for his cartoons. By 1958, Brown was attending art classes at Wilson Junior College, driving a Chicago Transit Authority bus and sketching the dramas of everyday life. Attending the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Brown submitted his cartoons to various publications, and one was accepted by Hugh Hefner of Playboy magazine in 1961. Brown graduated with a B.F.A. degree in 1966.

After nearly fifty years, Brown was best known for his cartoons painted in acrylic colors. His famous naughty "Granny" became a permanent fixture in Playboy magazine. Brown, whose fame came at the height of the Civil Rights Movement, drew more white characters than black ones. However, Brown often depicted establishment types, like the U.S. Cavalry besieged by Indians or other people of color.

Brown not only made a name for himself as a cartoonist but also as a painter of humorous paintings. Some of his paintings were part of Bill and Camille Cosby’s art collection. Another celebrity singer, Johnny Mathis, had a wall in his office covered with Brown’s golf cartoons. His cartoons and illustrations had also appeared in Ebony, Ebony Junior, Jet and Esquire magazines.

Brown passed away on Monday, July 2, 2007 at age 71.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Robert "Buck" Brown was conducted by Larry Crowe on January 20, 2007, in University Park, Illinois, and was recorded on 7 Betacame SP videocassettes. Painter and cartoonist Robert "Buck" Brown (1936 - 2007) was well-known for his "Granny" cartoon, which appeared in Playboy magazine. His other works ran in the Chicago Sun-Times, Ebony, Jet, The New Yorker and other publications.

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:

Brown, Buck

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Brown, Buck--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Painter

Cartoonist

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 Robert "Buck" Brown, January 20, 2007. 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 Robert "Buck" Brown, Section A2007_022_001_001, TRT: 0:30:07 ?

Robert “Buck” Brown was born Bobby Brown on February 3, 1936 in Morrison, Tennessee to Doris Lemmings Brown and Michael Brown. His parents were born in Morrison to farmers. Brown’s father sustained permanent injuries from nerve gas while serving overseas in World War I. Upon his return, he was employed by the Works Progress Administration, and owned a farm. Brown’s

mother was married when she was around twelve years old, and Brown was born five years later. His parents' relationship was strained, and his mother left when Brown was young. Brown was raised by his maternal grandmother for one year, and recalls his grandfather's ghost stories. Brown's mother returned with a new husband, and took her two children to Chicago, Illinois. There, a teacher called him Robert, and Brown adopted the name. He remembers visiting his paternal grandparents during the summer after his graduation from Chicago's Englewood High School. Brown worked for Playboy magazine as a cartoonist, where he met Hugh Hefner and Alex Haley.

Video Oral History Interview with Robert "Buck" Brown, Section A2007_022_001_002, TRT: 0:28:47 ?

Robert "Buck" Brown's father and uncle served in World War I, where his father was injured in a nerve gas attack. After his father's U.S. military service, his parents met, marrying when his mother was twelve years old. Brown recalls ghost stories from his childhood in Morrison, Tennessee, and using a battery operated radio to listen to shows like 'The Lone Ranger' with his paternal grandmother. While his parents worked, Brown accompanied his older half-brothers to school, although he was too young to attend himself. He recalls how his interest in drawing began upon seeing a truck drawn on the blackboard. Eventually, his mother fled her unhappy marriage. She returned to Morrison a year later with a new husband, and brought her two sons to live with her on the South Side of Chicago, Illinois. Brown describes the city's segregated neighborhoods. He delivered newspapers in the neighborhood of Woodlawn, and attended Austin O. Sexton Elementary School, where he often designed posters and murals for his teachers.

Video Oral History Interview with Robert "Buck" Brown, Section A2007_022_001_003, TRT: 0:30:30 ?

Robert "Buck" Brown's family moved into the Princeton Park Homes in Chicago, Illinois. He attended Tilden Technical High School for his freshman year, then transferred to Englewood High School, where he took courses in art. Brown entered his artwork in a contest at the South Side Community Art Center, and earned third place. The first place winner was sculptor Richard Hunt. Brown's early drawings depicted humorous scenes, and he did not learn to portray risqué situations until working under the direction of Playboy's Hugh Hefner. When Brown was sixteen years old, his mother moved to Detroit, Michigan. Brown decided to remain in Chicago, working as a busboy at several restaurants, including the Old Barn. After graduation, Brown visited his family in Morrison, Tennessee, and returned to Chicago to work in a jewelry packing factory. Unsatisfied with his low wages, Brown enlisted in the U.S. Air Force, where he was stationed at Lackland Air Force Base in Bexar County, Texas, and faced racial discrimination.

Video Oral History Interview with Robert "Buck" Brown, Section A2007_022_001_004, TRT: 0:29:53 ?

Robert "Buck" Brown was stationed at the Lackland Air Force Base near San Antonio, Texas. While on leave in San Antonio, Brown was denied service at a restaurant, because of a state law against serving African Americans. Brown was then transferred to Ellsworth Air Force Base in Rapid City, South Dakota, where he was nearly disciplined for his caricature of a commanding officer with a Boeing B-52 Stratofortress. Brown obtained an early honorable discharge from the U.S. Air Force, so that he could attend Woodrow Wilson Junior College in Chicago, Illinois. While in school, Brown drove a bus for the Chicago Transit Authority (CTA). He applied to work in the CTA's art department, but was

denied. He describes his later realization that he was likely rejected based on his race. After graduating from Woodrow Wilson Junior College, Brown enrolled in the B.F.A. degree program at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. While studying there, he submitted cartoons to Playboy magazine, which began publishing his work.

Video Oral History Interview with Robert "Buck" Brown, Section A2007_022_001_005, TRT: 0:29:24 ?

Robert "Buck" Brown met his wife while attending the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign in Urbana-Champaign, Illinois, and recounts the story of their engagement. He quit his job at the Chicago Transit Authority, and decided to draw full time. He began working for Playboy in 1961, and, although he was offered a contract, worked as a freelancer there for decades. Brown describes the process of creating his acrylic based paintings for Playboy. His Granny cartoons were among his most popular comics published in the magazine. Brown enjoyed depicting scenes from the Wild West, inspired by the movies and radio shows of his childhood. He talks about people's opinions of his cartoons, including his depictions of Native Americans, and the audience he intended to reach. He also describes Hugh Hefner's influence upon his work. At the time of the interview, Brown had retired from Playboy. He occasionally submitted work, but devoted the majority of his efforts to his other paintings.

Video Oral History Interview with Robert "Buck" Brown, Section A2007_022_001_006, TRT: 0:29:36 ?

Robert "Buck" Brown reflects upon racial discrimination in the cartoon industry. He wanted to draw cartoons without references to race, but publications like the Chicago Tribune Syndicate only approved his work if the characters were portrayed as African American. Brown maintained ownership of the cartoons he drew for Playboy magazine, and sold them at the Friar's Club in New York City, as well as at Playboy Expos, where nearly sixty thousand dollars' worth of his artwork was purchased in 1999. Brown reflects upon his success at Playboy, and his decision to work as a freelance illustrator, rather than accepting a contract. Aside from Playboy, Brown also drew cartoons for the 'Sunny and Honey' comic in Ebony Jr.; Scott Foresman's publishing company; and Dollars and Sense magazine. Brown talks about the financial success of artist Leroy Neiman, and his influence upon Brown's career.

Video Oral History Interview with Robert "Buck" Brown, Section A2007_022_001_007, TRT: 0:30:17 ?

Robert "Buck" Brown talks about his favorite cartoonists, including Charles Addams, Charles Rodrigues and Michael Peters. Brown had two children with his wife, Mary Ellen Brown, and six grandchildren. Brown describes his hopes for the African American community, and how he would like to be remembered. Brown also reflects upon his career and legacy. He concludes the interview by narrating his photographs.