

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Joe Dickson

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Dickson, Joe, 1933-2018
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Joe Dickson,
Dates:	March 22, 2007
Bulk Dates:	2007
Physical Description:	7 Betacame SP videocassettes (3:08:45).
Abstract:	Civic leader Joe Dickson (1933 - 2018) was involved in the civil rights marches and selective buying campaigns in Birmingham. Dickson later formed his own real estate and construction company, was the President of the Alabama Republican Council, and served as Alabama's assistant of Minority Affairs. Dickson was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on March 22, 2007, in Birmingham, Alabama. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2007_106
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Civic leader Joe Dickson was born on March 5, 1933, in Montgomery, Alabama, to Mary Rachael and Robert Dickson. Dickson was raised by his widowed mother and his aunt Gertrude; he attended a Catholic elementary school before the family moved to the projects in Birmingham in 1939. Dickson graduated from Fairfield Industrial High School in 1950, and worked as a welder until he entered the United States Army.

Dickson then enrolled in Miles College from which he received his B.A. degree in sociology. While at Miles College, Dickson was involved in the civil rights marches and selective buying campaigns; he was arrested along with Rev. Fred L. Shuttlesworth and other civil rights activists in front of the federal court house in Birmingham. In the 1960s, Dickson joined A.G. Gaston's Washington Insurance Company as an insurance agent, working in six different counties. Dickson also worked with the Urban League and acted as the deputy director for an experimental demonstration project at Miles College that trained African Americans for jobs within the community.

In 1970, Dickson attended Howard University Law School from which he earned his J.D. degree in 1973. Dickson then returned to Alabama and formed his own real estate and construction company. Dickson was the President of the Alabama Republican Council for a number of years and was asked to work for the former governor of Alabama, Guy Hunt, as the Assistant of Minority Affairs in 1988. Dickson began working with the *Birmingham World* newspaper in 1987 and in 1989 returned to run the paper. Dickson married Dr. Charlie Mae Dickson; together they had eight adult children.

Dickson passed away on July 21, 2018.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Joe Dickson was conducted by Denise Gines on March 22, 2007, in Birmingham, Alabama, and was recorded on 7 Betacame SP videocassettes. Civic leader Joe Dickson (1933 - 2018) was involved in the civil rights marches and selective buying campaigns in Birmingham. Dickson later formed his own real estate and construction company, was the President of the Alabama Republican Council, and served as Alabama's assistant of Minority Affairs.

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:

Dickson, Joe, 1933-2018

Gines, Denise (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Dickson, Joe, 1933-2018 --Interviews

African American businesspeople--Interviews

African American civil rights workers--Interviews

African American lawyers--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Civic Leader

HistoryMakers® Category:

CivicMakers

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 Joe Dickson, March 22, 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 Joe Dickson, Section A2007_106_001_001, TRT: 0:29:00 ?

Joe Dickson was born on March 5, 1933 in Montgomery, Alabama to Rachel Payne Dickson and Robert Dickson, Sr. His paternal family originated on the Dicksonia Plantation in Hayneville, Alabama, while his maternal great-grandparents and grandparents were farmworkers in Hopewell, Alabama. There, Dickson's mother assisted with fieldwork until the age of ten years old, when she was hired as a cook for a white family, with whom she travelled to France. She later moved to Montgomery, Alabama, where she studied at the State Normal School for Colored Students. She raised Dickson in Montgomery, and homeschooled him for a time after he was beaten by his teacher at the local Catholic school. Dickson's father worked at a saw mill in Montgomery until 1938, when he died from pneumonia. Dickson's uncle and aunt died shortly afterwards, and his mother adopted their children. When Dickson was in the third grade, he and his four siblings were sent to live with his maternal aunt, Gertrude Payne, near Birmingham, Alabama.

African American businesspeople--Interviews.

African American civil rights workers--Interviews.

African American lawyers--Interviews.

Video Oral History Interview with Joe Dickson, Section A2007_106_001_002, TRT: 0:28:20 ?

Joe Dickson and his siblings attempted to run away from their maternal aunt and uncle's home in Fairfield, Alabama; and eventually convinced their mother, Rachel Payne Dickson, to rent a unit in Fairfield's housing projects. Dickson attended Robinson Elementary School, where he excelled academically despite his frequent tardiness. After school, he worked as a newspaper delivery boy. Dickson continued delivering newspapers while a student at Fairfield Industrial High School. There, he was elected class president every year; and was influenced by Principal E.J. Oliver, who ensured that Dickson and his peers learned about African American history. Dickson was also shaped by the African American community in town, where he was exposed to successful black businessmen and students from the historically black Miles College. After graduating from high school in 1952, Dickson worked briefly as a welder at the Vulcan Furniture Manufacturing Company, and was then drafted into the U.S. Army.

Video Oral History Interview with Joe Dickson, Section A2007_106_001_003, TRT: 0:29:00 ?

Joe Dickson was drafted into the U.S. Army in 1953, during the Korean War. He hoped to return quickly to his mother and siblings in Fairfield, Alabama, and refused an officer's suggestion that he enroll at the United States Military Academy in West Point, New York. A truce was declared in the Korean War, and Dickson was discharged in 1955 without having served overseas. Dickson, who developed ulcers while in the U.S. Army, nearly refused his disability compensation in his rush to return to Fairfield. There, Dickson worked as a dishwasher at the Lloyd Noland Hospital, until his mother convinced him to enroll at Fairfield's Miles College, where his tuition was paid through the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944. Dickson studied subjects like French and sociology for the first time, and joined his fellow students in demonstrations against segregation in Birmingham, Alabama. He continued his civil rights activities after graduating in 1960.

Video Oral History Interview with Joe Dickson, Section A2007_106_001_004, TRT: 0:28:30 ?

Joe Dickson participated in civil rights demonstrations in Fairfield, Alabama while working at A.G. Gaston's Booker T. Washington Insurance Company in the 1960s. Dickson later moved to New York City, where he was briefly enrolled in a management training program; but returned to Fairfield shortly after being hospitalized for an ulcer. In Fairfield, he rejoined the Booker T.

Washington Insurance Company, and began working with the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights. He marched alongside the movement's leader, Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth, and Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.; and took part in a selective buying campaign that targeted department stores in nearby Birmingham, Alabama. Dickson was jailed repeatedly for his involvement, and was always bailed out by Gaston, his employer. Then, while selling insurance in Tuskegee, Alabama, Dickson was approached by Frank Dukes and Lucius Holsey Pitts, Sr. to help manage the Excel Superstores, a supermarket franchise venture aimed at black entrepreneurs.

Video Oral History Interview with Joe Dickson, Section A2007_106_001_005, TRT: 0:30:20 ?

Joe Dickson became disenchanted with nonviolent action after witnessing the brutality of the Birmingham Police Department against Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth. Dickson worked for a time at the Excel Superstores in Tuskegee, Alabama, but was accused of stealing and fired. He rebuilt his reputation by serving as the executive director of the Southern Beauty Congress for one year, and was then hired to help direct an employment training program at Miles College. Next, Dickson joined the Urban League's Project Assist, which helped African Americans advance in the workplace. He was recruited as a salesman for Blue Cross Blue Shield in 1967; and, while selling insurance policies, met and married his second wife in Fairfield, Alabama. With her encouragement, Dickson matriculated at the Howard University School of Law in 1970. Following his graduation in 1973, Dickson's former employer, businessman A.G. Gaston, urged him to use his law degree to help others.

Video Oral History Interview with Joe Dickson, Section A2007_106_001_006, TRT: 0:29:40 ?

Joe Dickson managed A.G. Gaston's Vulcan Realty and Investment Corporation until 1976, when he purchased a Century 21 Real Estate franchise. He worked with the local government to increase black homeownership in Birmingham, Alabama, and later founded the CD&W Construction Company to develop the city's housing infrastructure. The business suffered when the bank withdrew its support, and Dickson returned to the Vulcan Realty and Investment Corporation. Next, Dickson was named the assistant for minority affairs to Alabama Governor H. Guy Hunt, whom he advised regarding the protests against the Confederate flag. In 1989, he left the governor's office, and purchased the Birmingham World, a local newspaper founded by Emory O. Jackson. The following year, Governor Hunt nominated Dickson to the state personnel board, where he continued serving under governors Fob James and Bob Riley. Dickson also talks about founding his own real estate company, and shares his plans for the Birmingham World newspaper.

Video Oral History Interview with Joe Dickson, Section A2007_106_001_007, TRT: 0:13:55 ?

Joe Dickson was the owner of the Birmingham World newspaper in Birmingham, Alabama. During the State of Alabama's gubernatorial election in 1998, the newspaper attracted scrutiny because of Dickson's support for Winton M. Blount III, a Republican candidate. He describes his hope to resume publishing the newspaper, and reflects upon his life. Dickson also reflects upon the state of race relations in the United States at the time of the interview, and his advice to future generations. He concludes the interview by describing how he would like to be remembered.