

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Claude Walton

Overview of the Collection

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| Repository: | The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com |
| Creator: | Walton, Claude, 1913-2014 |
| Title: | The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Claude Walton, |
| Dates: | November 22, 2008 and November 4, 2008 |
| Bulk Dates: | 2008 |
| Physical Description: | 8 Betacame SP videocassettes (4:00:30). |
| Abstract: | Discus thrower Claude Walton (1913 - 2014) was the first All-American athlete at the University of Colorado, twice winning the Rocky Mountain Athletic Conference title. Seventy-five years after Walton attended the University of Colorado, alumni and faculty members mounted a successful campaign to get him an honorary degree and entry into the university's Hall of Fame in 2008. Walton was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on November 22, 2008 and November 4, 2008, in Lombard, Illinois. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview. |
| Identification: | A2008_122 |
| Language: | The interview and records are in English. |

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

All-American discus thrower Claude Alex Walton was born on August 1, 1913, in Marshall, Texas, to Claude Walton and Jenny V. Walton. Walton graduated from Denver, Colorado's West High School in 1931.

After finishing high school, Walton attended the University of Colorado as a music major (piano). At 6 feet, 3 inches tall, Walton was approached by the track coach to encourage him to try out for the track team. Walton became the first African American varsity athlete at the University of Colorado, where he excelled as a discus thrower and played basketball.

While attending the University of Colorado, Walton was only one of six minority students on campus and his treatment was not always pleasant. Walton supported himself in school by working various jobs including as a hasher in the dining room at the Chi Psi fraternity house. He also found work sewing and stuffing mats for the track team, spreading sawdust in jumping pits and watering the football fields. At night, Walton played the piano in house bands at Denver and Boulder clubs. He played in the orchestra at the Airport Ballroom and for the dances of the sororities and fraternities. Unfortunately, Walton broke his ankle right before the qualifying meets for the 1936 Olympics so he could not compete in the Olympics in Germany with Jesse Owens. Nevertheless, he was named All-American after coming in second place in a 1937 national track meet, making him the first All-American athlete at The University of Colorado. Walton set the school record in the discus throw with a mark of 141-feet, 2 ½ inches. This effort earned him the Rocky Mountain Athletic Conference title. During his athletic career, Walton would best this mark several times. A discus throw of 157 feet at Colorado School of Mines in 1935 earned him national attention because it was the second best throw in the country at the time. Walton dominated the Rocky Mountain Athletic Conference and was a two-time champion. The track star left school for a steady job with the Chicago Park District (where he reached the position of associate superintendent) with just one English literature

class remaining, making him ineligible for his B.A. degree and a place in the school's Hall of Fame. Seventy-five years after Walton attended The University of Colorado, alumni and faculty members mounted a successful campaign to get him an honorary degree and entry into the university's Hall of Fame in 2008. At ninety-four years old, he is the oldest Hall of Fame inductee.

Walton worked for the Chicago Park District for forty-eight years, eventually becoming a trustee for the department. He resides in Lombard, Illinois.

Walton passed away on March 24, 2014.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Claude Walton was conducted by Larry Crowe and Thomas Jefferson on November 22, 2008 and November 4, 2008, in Lombard, Illinois, and was recorded on 8 Betacame SP videocassettes. Discus thrower Claude Walton (1913 - 2014) was the first All-American athlete at the University of Colorado, twice winning the Rocky Mountain Athletic Conference title. Seventy-five years after Walton attended the University of Colorado, alumni and faculty members mounted a successful campaign to get him an honorary degree and entry into the university's Hall of Fame in 2008.

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:

Walton, Claude, 1913-2014

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Jefferson, Thomas (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews
Walton, Claude, 1913-2014 --Interviews

African American college athletes--Colorado--Interviews

Parks--Employees--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

University of Colorado (Boulder campus)

Occupations:

Discus Thrower

HistoryMakers® Category:

SportsMakers

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 Claude Walton, November 22, 2008 and November 4, 2008. 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 Claude Walton, Section A2008_122_001_001, TRT: 0:30:10 ?

Claude Walton was born on August 1, 1913 in Marshall, Texas to Jennie Woolridge Walton and Claude Walton, Sr. His father was born in 1875 in Marshall, where he grew up with his three brothers. Walton's maternal grandmother, Marie Woolridge, was the first in the family to migrate to Denver, Colorado, followed by his maternal uncle, James Woolridge, who was involved with the Negro minor league team, the Denver White Elephants. Walton and his parents moved to Denver shortly after his birth. There, his mother was employed part-time as a salesperson in the fine China section of a department store, while his father worked as a Pullman porter, which caused him to travel frequently. Walton grew up as an only child in Denver, and enjoyed watching Denver White Elephants games on Sundays. He went on to attend the University of Colorado Boulder, where he became a gold medal-winning discus thrower on the track team. Walton later worked as a recreational instructor with the Chicago Parks District in Chicago, Illinois.

African American college athletes--Colorado--Interviews.

Parks--Employees--Interviews.

Video Oral History Interview with Claude Walton, Section A2008_122_001_002, TRT: 0:30:20 ?

Claude Walton's maternal uncle, James Woolridge, was the first African American doorman at The Brown Palace Hotel in Denver, Colorado. Walton's father, Claude Walton, Sr., was often away from home for his work as a Pullman porter. When he was home, he attended Denver's New Hope Baptist Church, while Walton and his mother, Jennie Woolridge Walton, attended Central Baptist Church. Walton was raised in a racially mixed community in east Denver, where he learned to play the piano at an early age, and joined a dance band. At night, the band was hired to play two step and foxtrot music at parties and the local taxi dance hall. Although Walton considered leaving school to play music full-time, Walton's father convinced him to transfer to West High School, and focus on his schoolwork and athletics. He joined the basketball and track teams, where he specialized in discus throwing. He also exhibited a talent for carpentry work. He remembers his mother's unique coin collection.

Video Oral History Interview with Claude Walton, Section A2008_122_001_003, TRT: 0:31:10 ?

Claude Walton was seventeen years old when the Great Depression occurred in 1929. During this time, his father, Claude Walton, Sr., retained his position as a Pullman porter. Walton began playing basketball at West High School in Denver, Colorado, where he was one of fourteen African American students. Walton faced discrimination from the opposing teams, who targeted him as the only African American player at West High School. Upon graduation, Walton enrolled at the University of Colorado Boulder in Boulder, Colorado, even

though he could not afford tuition or basic necessities after the Great Depression. Eventually, he found work as a waiter, and played music. At the University of Colorado Boulder, Walton joined the basketball team, and continued to endure racial prejudice. To avoid potential conflict, Walton was excluded by his coach, Henry Iba, from the pre-season games in the South. He remembers the legacy of boxers Joe Louis and Jack Johnson.

Video Oral History Interview with Claude Walton, Section A2008_122_001_004, TRT: 0:29:40 ?

Claude Walton left home to play piano professionally in Casper, Wyoming after his graduation from West High School in Denver, Colorado. There, he met the governor's wife, who guaranteed him enrollment at the University of Wyoming in Laramie, Wyoming. However, he soon found that the harsh winter weather would hinder his travels between work and the university. Walton then matriculated at the University of Colorado Boulder, and worked as a hasher for the Chi Psi Fraternity, which provided him with food, and room and board. He studied music in the College of Music, and became the star discus thrower and shot putter on campus. During that time, Walton was the only African American athlete in the entire Rocky Mountain Conference. Confined by the traditional music training at the University of Colorado Boulder, Walton began experimenting with jazz music, and met musicians Duke Ellington and George Morrison. Walton eventually abandoned his musical aspirations.

Video Oral History Interview with Claude Walton, Section A2008_122_001_005, TRT: 0:30:40 ?

Claude Walton won a gold medal in discus throwing at the 1935 NCAA Track and Field Championships in Berkeley, California. He competed in the 1936 NCAA Track and Field Championships in Chicago, Illinois but failed to place for the 1936 Summer Olympics tryouts due to an injury sustained during an invitational meet held at the University of Chicago. Walton stayed in Chicago for the summer, and became acquainted with Committeeman Edward Sneed, who offered him a position with the Chicago Park District. Walton initially declined, and returned to the University of Colorado Boulder to finish his last year. However, he left without obtaining his diploma, and moved to Chicago, where he began his forty-five year career with the Chicago Park District. Walton was inducted into the University of Colorado Athletic Hall of Fame and Colorado's Living Legends of Sports. He recalls his friendships with fellow athletes, future U.S. Supreme Court Justice Byron R. White and Gil Cruter, who was a world high jump record holder.

Video Oral History Interview with Claude Walton, Section A2008_122_002_006, TRT: 0:29:20 ?

Claude Walton was hired as a physical education instructor with the Chicago Park District in 1940, and assigned to Washington Park and Ada Park. Washington Park's field house contained one of the first Olympic size pools east of California, and was utilized by swimmer Esther Williams. As the racial geography of Chicago changed, Walton was sent to Seward Park on the city's North Side to integrate the Chicago Park District faculty there. However, Chicago remained mostly segregated, and the faculty continued to reflect the racial demographics of their participants. The Chicago Park District staff were trained in a variety of sports by famed instructors, like Olympic Swimmer Johnny Weissmuller and Olympic Track Star John Brooks, who specialized in square dancing lessons. At the time, the park districts also offered classes in dressmaking, crafts, woodwork and photography. Walton was promoted to park supervisor based on his years of experience as an instructor.

Video Oral History Interview with Claude Walton, Section A2008_122_002_007, TRT: 0:30:30 ?

Claude Walton was a recreational instructor at Washington Park in Chicago, Illinois, which had a functional lagoon, lighted croquet courts and an archery

range. At the time, Washington Park served a primarily white demographic, but as the neighborhood changed, the park began to cater to the incoming African American residents. As a result, the underserved African American communities on the South Side of Chicago began to lobby for more programs and facilities. Walton also worked at Seward Park under supervisor George W. Dunne, who later became a county commissioner in Chicago. In recognition of his work, Walton was assigned to organize the volleyball and tennis tournaments in the 1959 Pan American Games. Then, Walton was sent to Addams/Medill Park, where he supervised three additional locations. He was later promoted to assistant director of employee activities. Walton describes the political structure of the Chicago Park District, and its major challenges, including budgeting and gang activity.

Video Oral History Interview with Claude Walton, Section A2008_122_002_008, TRT: 0:28:40 ?

Claude Walton became the first African American administrator in the employee activities department of the Chicago Park District in 1964. In 1970, he was promoted to associate superintendent, a position created specifically for him by the Cook County commissioners, including John F. McGuane and George W. Dunne. Walton retired after forty-five years with the Chicago Park District, and was appointed as trustee of the Park Employees' Annuity and Benefit Fund of Chicago in 1978. He remained on the board for many years; and under his leadership, the fund grew from \$25 million to \$600 million. Walton and his wife, Darwin McBeth Walton, had two children: John Walton and Claudette Walton Giles. He describes his hopes and concerns for the African American community. Walton also reflects upon his life, legacy and how he would like to be remembered. He concludes the interview by narrating his photographs.