

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Percy Pierre

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Pierre, Percy A.
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Percy Pierre,
Dates:	September 13, 2012
Bulk Dates:	2012
Physical Description:	7 uncompressed MOV digital video files (3:08:46).
Abstract:	Electrical engineer Percy Pierre (1939 -) was known for his work in signal processing, as well as for creating programs to increase opportunities for minority graduate engineering students. Pierre was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on September 13, 2012, in Washington, District of Columbia. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2012_224
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Electrical engineer Percy A. Pierre was born on January 1, 1939 in Welcome, Louisiana to Rosa Villavaso and Percy John Pierre. Pierre graduated from St. Augustine High School in New Orleans in 1957. Reverend Matthew O'Rourke, the school's founding principal and president, served as one of Pierre's mentors. It was in his senior year of high school that Pierre first decided to enter the field of engineering. Pierre received his B.S. degree in electrical engineering from the University of Notre Dame in 1961. He stayed at the University and received his M.S. degree in 1963. Pierre went on to receive his Ph.D. degree in electrical engineering from John Hopkins University in 1967. He is the first African American in the country to earn a Ph.D. degree in electrical engineering.

After graduation, Pierre began a series of successful posts in government and higher education. In 1969, Pierre was selected to serve as a White House Fellow and Deputy to the Assistant to the President for Urban Affairs. In 1971, he joined the faculty of Howard University as Dean of the School of Engineering. As dean, Pierre was instrumental in the founding of the National Action Council for Minorities in Engineering (NACME). In 1977, he left Howard University to serve as Assistant Secretary to the United States Army for Research, Development, and Acquisition, where he managed a \$12 billion budget. Pierre started his own consulting business, Percy A. and Associates in 1981. He returned to academia in 1983, serving as President of Prairie View Agricultural and Mechanical (A&M) University, and later as Honeywell Professor of Electrical Engineering.

Pierre came to Michigan State University in 1990 as Vice President for Research and Graduate Studies. In 1995, he became a professor of electrical and computer engineering. Pierre has taught courses and participated in research in the areas of signals and systems, random processes, and signal detection and estimation. He believes his greatest achievement in his field to be the exploration of linear functions and their properties. In addition to his research, Pierre has also created numerous programs to increase the financial support and mentoring opportunities available for minority graduate engineering students; most notably creating the Sloan Engineering Program in 1998. Pierre has served on many boards, including the National Security Advisory Board and the Defense Science Board. He

was honored with the Founders Award from NACME in 2004 in celebration of the organization's thirtieth anniversary. He also received the Mentor Award for Lifetime Achievement from the American Association for the Advancement of Science in 2008. Pierre is married to Olga A. Markham and they have two grown daughters, Kristin Clare and Allison Celeste.

Percy A. Pierre was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on September 13, 2012.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Percy Pierre was conducted by Larry Crowe on September 13, 2012, in Washington, District of Columbia, and was recorded on 7 uncompressed MOV digital video files. Electrical engineer Percy Pierre (1939 -) was known for his work in signal processing, as well as for creating programs to increase opportunities for minority graduate engineering students.

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:

Pierre, Percy A.

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Pierre, Percy A.--Interviews

African American engineers--Interviews.

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Michigan State University; Prairie View Agricultural and Mechanical College; Howard University; United States. Army

Occupations:

Electrical Engineer

HistoryMakers® Category:

ScienceMakers

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 Percy Pierre, September 13, 2012. 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 Percy Pierre, Section A2012_224_001_001, TRT: 1:29:40 ?

Percy Pierre describes the details of his ancestry. Pierre was born in 1939 in the town of Welcome, in St. James Parish, Louisiana. His mother, Rosa Villavaso, was also born in St. James Parish in 1915, and grew up on a farm. Her grandparents were plantation slaves, and her mixed ancestry traced back to Europe and Africa. Pierre's father, Percy Pierre, Sr., was born in 1912 in Freetown, St. James Parish. His ancestry traces back to Mozambique, East Africa to Terese, who was enslaved and brought to the Americas in 1790. Upon emancipation, the freed slaves on Pierre's paternal side of the family adopted their father's name as their surname, instead of the slave-owner's surname. The Pierre family also established the town of Freetown and the Freetown Benevolent Society, fostering the spirit of self-help amongst freed slaves in the region.

African American families--Louisiana.

African American mothers--Louisiana.

African American fathers--Louisiana.

Slavery--Louisiana.

Racially mixed people--Louisiana.

Video Oral History Interview with Percy Pierre, Section A2012_224_001_002, TRT: 2:28:59 ?

Percy Pierre's parents, Rosa Villavaso and Percy Pierre, Sr., met as teenagers in St. James Parish, Louisiana, and married in 1937. His family moved to Gulfport, Mississippi, when he was two years old, where they lived in the beachfront motel where his parents worked. He describes his two years in Gulfport as idyllic times. Pierre's family then moved to New Orleans in 1943, when he was four years old. The extended family was a close-knit group, and Pierre lived in a relatively mixed neighborhood. He helped his father build their family home on Hamilton Street. Pierre received his elementary school education at Blessed Sacrament School and St. Joan of Arc Catholic School.

African American families.

Childhood--Mississippi--Gulfport.

Childhood--Louisiana--New Orleans.

Integration.

Catholic education--Louisiana.

Video Oral History Interview with Percy Pierre, Section A2012_224_001_003, TRT: 3:29:16 ?

Percy Pierre played basketball as a young boy, starting in fourth grade and continuing on to high school. He also enjoyed math, science and reading. His first book on the story of Roald Amundsen, the first man to reach the South Pole, inspired him to visit the South Pole in 1979. The book as well as his own father's approach to life influenced Pierre to appreciate and develop rational problem-solving skills. Pierre attended St. Augustine's High School in New Orleans, Louisiana, where he was influenced by his basketball coach, Nick Conners, and his civics teacher, Father Grant.

High school athletes.

Amundsen, Roald, 1872-1928.

Childhood--Louisiana--New Orleans.

Catholic education--Louisiana.

Mentoring.

Video Oral History Interview with Percy Pierre, Section A2012_224_001_004, TRT: 4:28:58 ?

Percy Pierre graduated from St. Augustine's High School in New Orleans in 1957. Influenced by Father O'Rourke, the principal at St. Augustine's, Pierre began his undergraduate studies in electrical engineering at the University of Notre Dame. After earning his bachelor's degree in 1961, he obtained a master's of science degree in electrical engineering in 1963, where he developed an interest in signal processing. Pierre went on to pursue his Ph.D. degree at Johns Hopkins University, where he focused on signal detection under the tutelage of Bill Huggins and Steve Wolf.

Catholic education--Louisiana.

Mentoring.

University of Notre Dame.

Electrical engineering.

Johns Hopkins University.

Video Oral History Interview with Percy Pierre, Section A2012_224_001_005, TRT: 5:29:28 ?

Percy Pierre began his doctoral studies at Johns Hopkins University in 1963. He was the first African American to earn a Ph.D. in electrical engineering. He was also the first postdoctoral researcher at the University of Michigan's College of Engineering, from 1967 to 1968. In 1968, Pierre joined the Rand Corporation, where his engineering skills were used to solve urban problems. Concurrently, Pierre received a White House fellowship in 1969, and spent a year working as a deputy to Pat Moynihan, the counselor on urban affairs for President Richard Nixon's administration. In 1971, Pierre became the dean of the college of engineering at Howard University, where he established the first two doctoral programs in engineering at an HBCU. He was involved in establishing the Urban Systems Engineering program, and in founding the National Action Council for Minorities in Engineering (NACME) in 1973.

Johns Hopkins University.

Electrical engineering.

University of Michigan.

Rand Corporation.

White House (Washington, D.C.).

Nixon, Richard M. (Richard Milhous), 1913-1994.

Howard University.

National Action Council for Minorities in Engineering (U.S.).

Video Oral History Interview with Percy Pierre, Section A2012_224_001_006, TRT: 6:29:07 ?

Percy Pierre founded NACME in 1973. He also established several other organizations that impact minority engineering opportunities. From 1977 to 1981, during President Jimmy Carter's administration, Pierre served at the Pentagon as the assistant secretary of the Army for research and development, becoming the first African American to hold this position. From 1983 to 1989, Pierre served as the president of Prairie View A&M University in Texas, where he increased enrollment and strengthened the quality of undergraduate education. Pierre joined Michigan State University in 1990, and currently serves as the vice president of research and graduate studies. At Michigan State University, Pierre's focus has been on minority engineering education. He has been responsible for the recruitment and training of approximately 200 minority

engineering graduates. In recognition of his years of service, Pierre was elected to the National Academy of Engineering in 2009.

National Action Council for Minorities in Engineering (U.S.).

Carter, Jimmy, 1924-.

Pentagon (Va.).

Prairie View A & M University.

Michigan State University.

Minorities in engineering.

National Academy of Engineering.

Video Oral History Interview with Percy Pierre, Section A2012_224_001_007, TRT: 7:13:18 ?

Percy Pierre reflects upon his career and the African American community. He believes that his legacy lies in his mentorship, his impact on minority engineering, and in his contributions at the Pentagon, during President Jimmy Carter's administration. Pierre married Olga Markham in 1965, and they have two daughters. He wants to be remembered for helping his family grow, for his contributions at the Pentagon, and for his work to improve educational opportunities for the African American community. Finally, Pierre describes his photographs.

Reminiscing.

Mentoring.

Pentagon (Va.).

African American families.

Photographs.