

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Clarence Irving, Sr.

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Irving, Clarence L., Sr., 1924-2014
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Clarence Irving, Sr.,
Dates:	July 12, 2013
Bulk Dates:	2013
Physical Description:	10 uncompressed MOV digital video files (4:40:23).
Abstract:	Cultural activist Clarence Irving, Sr. (1924 - 2014) founded the Bison Athletic Club in the Brownsville neighborhood of Brooklyn, New York. He also created the Black American Heritage Foundation, and proposed the Black Heritage Series of U.S. postage stamps. Irving was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on July 12, 2013, in Middle Island, New York. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2013_198
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Cultural activist Clarence L. Irving, Sr. was born on August 21, 1924 in Prince George County, Virginia. His father, Paul Irving, was a farmer; his mother, Elizabeth Claiborne, a housewife. After attending Thaddeus Stevens Elementary School and Randall, Jr. High School in Washington, D.C., Irving moved to New York City where he graduated from the Brooklyn Naval Shipyard in 1952 and Brooklyn Technical Evening School in 1960.

From 1944 to 1953, Irving worked mechanist at the U.S. Naval Yard. In April of 1946, he organized his first baseball team in Brooklyn, New York. Then, in 1949, Irving's team, the Falcons, became the undefeated championship team in the Betsy Hyde Park Baseball League Junior Division. He began working for Con Edison in 1953 as an electrical planner in the electrical power plant. Irving continued coaching youth baseball and went on to organize the Bisons, which by 1955 became very successful in the Brooklyn Kiwanis League, winning seven championship seasons in three divisions. On September 9, 1955, the Bisons won the New York State Kiwanis Baseball Senior Division Championship at Abner Doubleday Field in Cooperstown, New York, making it the first time a baseball team with an African American manager and coach played on the field. In 1956, Irving retired from managing youth baseball teams and developed the Bison Athletic Club where he served as a mentor.

In 1972, Irving conceived the idea of commemorating African American Women on U.S. postage stamps. Two years later, the U.S. Postal Service created a new series of stamps commemorating African Americans, "The Black Heritage U.S.A. Series." Then, in 1984, Irving founded the Black American Heritage Foundation (BAHF) to document, preserve, and disseminate information about the accomplishments of African Americans. He also founded the Music History Archive in 1989, which serves as a repository for many original scores, early recordings, instruments, costumes, photographs, sheet music, and other artifacts related to musicians.

Irving holds the sole distinction of being honored by three elected women borough presidents of New York City:

the Honorable Claire Shilman of Queens; the Honorable Helen M. Marshall of Queens; and the Honorable C. Virginia Fields of Manhattan. In 1996, New York Governor George E. Pataki, along with New York Senator Alton R. Waldon and New York City Assemblywoman Barbara Clark, named April 8th “Clarence L. Irving, Sr. Day.” He received the 1999 Carter G. Woodson Award and the 2000 Humanitarian Award from Omega Psi Phi Fraternity, Inc. In 2007, the U.S. House of Representatives honored Irving by renaming the U.S. Postal Service Office in Jamaica, New York the “Clarence L. Irving, Sr. Post Office Building.”

Irving passed away in March of 2014 at the age of 90.

Clarence L. Irving, Sr. was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on July 11, 2013.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Clarence Irving, Sr. was conducted by Larry Crowe on July 12, 2013, in Middle Island, New York, and was recorded on 10 uncompressed MOV digital video files. Cultural activist Clarence Irving, Sr. (1924 - 2014) founded the Bison Athletic Club in the Brownsville neighborhood of Brooklyn, New York. He also created the Black American Heritage Foundation, and proposed the Black Heritage Series of U.S. postage stamps.

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:

Irving, Clarence L., Sr., 1924-2014

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews
Irving, Clarence L., Sr., 1924-2014 --Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Cultural Activist

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 Clarence Irving, Sr., July 12, 2013. 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 Clarence Irving, Sr., Section A2013_198_001_001, TRT: 1:28:10 ?

Clarence Irving, Sr. was born on August 21, 1924 in Prince George County, Virginia to Elizabeth Claiborne Irving and Paul Irving. His maternal family was descended from one of the first African slaves brought to the British colonies in 1619. This ancestor was seized from a Portuguese ship by the English sailors aboard the White Lion. They made landfall in Jamestown, Virginia, where Irving's ancestor married a Powhatan woman and assumed the surname of his slaveholder, surveyor William Claiborne. Centuries later, Clarence's mother was born in Prince George County. At fourteen years old, she left home to work at a boarding school for wealthy, white children in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. There, she learned reading, writing and music. Clarence's parents met at a religious revival in Hopewell, Virginia. Together, they raised three sons and three daughters, of whom Irving was the youngest child. His family was acquainted with black historian Carter G. Woodson, who encouraged Irving to pursue his education.

Video Oral History Interview with Clarence Irving, Sr., Section A2013_198_001_002, TRT: 2:28:15 ?

Clarence Irving, Sr.'s parents, Elizabeth Claiborne Irving and Paul Irving, met at a religious revival in Hopewell, Virginia. They married after six years of courtship. Irving's father learned to read and write from his cousin, Fannie Belcher, and worked at the Newport News Shipbuilding and Dry Dock Company until 1922. At that time, he purchased farmland in Prince George County, Virginia, and settled there with Irving's mother. Although tobacco was the local cash crop, his parents raised corn and string beans instead. They harvested the crops with their own threshing machine. Irving's father passed away in 1933, when Irving was nine years old. At this point in the interview, he remembers the dispute between his father and oldest sister, Lillian Irving Williams, who eloped with a film producer against their father's wishes. He also talks about the influence of Dr. Benjamin Quarles, whom he saw for the last time in Baltimore, Maryland during the 1990s.

Video Oral History Interview with Clarence Irving, Sr., Section A2013_198_001_003, TRT: 3:28:23 ?

Clarence Irving, Sr. spent his early childhood on his family's 300-acre farm in Prince George County, Virginia. There, he began his education at the all-black Brandon School No. 7, which was built with land and lumber donated by his father, Paul Irving. As the school received no outside funding, the faculty often resided at Irving's home, where the itinerant minister was also a frequent guest. After Irving's father died in 1933, his mother, Elizabeth Claiborne Irving, sent him to live with his older sister, Lillian Irving Williams, in Norfolk, Virginia. After some time, Irving moved with his sister and her second husband, Barnes Brown, to Washington, D.C. There, he joined the Cub Scouts and participated in activities with the American Legion. In this part of this interview, Irving remembers his early interest in engineering, which was influenced by stories from members of the Civilian Conservation Corps. He also recalls the impact of the Great Depression, and his childhood mischief on the farm.

Video Oral History Interview with Clarence Irving, Sr., Section A2013_198_001_004, TRT: 4:33:28 ?

Clarence Irving, Sr. lived with his sister, Lillian Irving Williams, in Norfolk, Virginia from 1933. During this time, Irving was an honor roll student. He learned to write in cursive using the Locker Easy Method Writing system, which was developed in the Norfolk area. After two years, Irving and his sister relocated to Washington, D.C., where he continued his schooling at Thaddeus Stevens Elementary School under Principal Lillian S. Malone. There, Irving was introduced to the renowned black historian and educator Carter G. Woodson. At this point in the interview, Irving describes Woodson's influence on his early education. He was a mentor to Irving's teachers, and emphasized the importance of education to Irving and his peers. However, despite Woodson's encouragement, one of Irving's teachers dissuaded him from completing his secondary education. Instead, Irving joined his older brother in Brooklyn, New York, where he obtained technical training and became a machinist in the Brooklyn Navy Yard.

Video Oral History Interview with Clarence Irving, Sr., Section A2013_198_001_005, TRT: 5:28:57 ?

Clarence Irving, Sr. worked part time as a nightclub singer in Washington, D.C. He moved to Brooklyn, New York in 1940, when he was sixteen years old. He trained as a machinist at the Brooklyn Navy Yard, and also aspired to become a professional baseball player like his older brother, Paul Irving. Irving played in the Negro Leagues for the Baltimore Black Sox, which was a farm team for the Newark Eagles. He eventually secured a position on the Newark Eagles; but, shortly afterwards, he developed appendicitis and ended his baseball career. In 1944, Irving was drafted into the U.S. military, and obtained an exemption to finish his machinist training. While working as a metal smith in Brooklyn, New York, Irving noticed the police harassing black children for playing stickball in the street, and decided to organize a youth baseball team. Under his leadership, Irving's team built a baseball diamond in a vacant lot near East New York Vocational High School, and won their first season in the Betsy Head League.

Video Oral History Interview with Clarence Irving, Sr., Section A2013_198_001_006, TRT: 6:27:51 ?

Clarence Irving, Sr. began volunteering as a youth baseball coach in the late 1940s. He planned to retire after a few years, but was encouraged by his friends to take over a high school team whose coach was moving to California. The team played in the Kiwanis League, and was named after Howard University's mascot, the Bisons. In 1953, the Bisons played a game in Peekskill, New York, a majority-white town where Paul Robeson was attacked by protestors during a concert four years earlier. The team won the game, as well as the state championship. The next year, several of Irving's players signed minority league contracts, and the Bisons lost the state championship to The Astoria Cubs. In 1955, the Bisons won the championship game, although they never received the trophy due to a rivalry between a league administrator and George Gainford, who managed the boxer Sugar Ray Robinson. Additionally, Irving talks about baseball player Jackie Robinson and his influence on the African American community.

Video Oral History Interview with Clarence Irving, Sr., Section A2013_198_001_007, TRT: 7:29:10 ?

Clarence Irving, Sr. developed his youth baseball team into the Bisons Athletic Club, which was based in the Brownsville neighborhood of Brooklyn, New York. The club provided recreational activities for the local youth, and developed a financial assistance program called Operation Elevation to help students secure a college education. Irving served as a mentor to the baseball

team members, and taught them to avoid encounters with the New York Police Department, which used discriminatory policing tactics in the neighborhood. The team alumni went on to become successful community members in Brooklyn, and several became professional athletes, including major league player Tommy Davis. In 1960, Irving obtained an electrician certification from the Brooklyn Technical Evening High School, and secured a position at Consolidated Edison, Inc. At this point in the interview, Irving talks about the importance of history, and the disregard for African American accomplishments in the engineering profession.

Video Oral History Interview with Clarence Irving, Sr., Section A2013_198_001_008, TRT: 8:28:35 ?

Clarence Irving, Sr. became involved in community recreation programming in Brooklyn, New York during the late 1940s. In 1976, he joined the majority-white Queens Bicentennial Committee, where he encountered blatant racial discrimination. After the white participants suggested that the African American members organize a separate committee, Irving contacted U.S. Representative Joseph P. Addabbo for support. With his help, Irving proposed a series of postage stamps featuring portraits of Harriet Tubman, Mary McLeod Bethune and Sojourner Truth. Despite objections from U.S. Senator Strom Thurmond, the bill passed, and the collection was named the Black Heritage Series. The first stamp was printed in 1978. At this point in the interview, Irving shares his dislike for Shirley Chisholm, who refused to support the black farmers in the class action lawsuit *Pigford v. Glickman*. He also talks about the sexual misconduct scandal that led to the disbandment of the Boys Choir of Harlem.

Video Oral History Interview with Clarence Irving, Sr., Section A2013_198_001_009, TRT: 9:39:12 ?

Clarence Irving, Sr. was interested in the music industry from an early age. In 1945, he partnered with his friend, Ernie Butler, to open a record shop in the Harlem neighborhood of New York City. At the time, black musicians like Roy Eldridge were playing integrated shows with white performers like Anita O'Day and Artie Shaw at the Apollo Theater. Over four decades later, Irving was instrumental in the creation of the York College-Black American Heritage Foundation Music History Archive in 1989. The archive was a collaboration between York College President Milton G. Bassin and the Black American Heritage Foundation, which Irving established in 1984 to preserve and celebrate African American history. At this point in the interview, Irving reflects upon his life and legacy as a community activist, and shares his advice to future generations. He concludes this part of the interview by talking about his three children: Carole Irving, Clarence Irving, Jr. and Anton Regales.

Video Oral History Interview with Clarence Irving, Sr., Section A2013_198_001_010, TRT: 10:08:22 ?

Clarence Irving, Sr. talks about his concerns for the United States, and concludes the interview by describing how he would like to be remembered.