

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Charles Thomas

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Thomas, Charles, 1951-
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Charles Thomas,
Dates:	January 24, 2014 and January 25, 2014
Bulk Dates:	2014
Physical Description:	10 uncompressed MOV digital video files (5:01:12).
Abstract:	Broadcast journalist Charles Thomas (1951 -) has been a reporter for Chicago's ABC 7 News for over twenty years. He was named ABC 7's political reporter in 2009. Thomas was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on January 24, 2014 and January 25, 2014, in Chicago, Illinois. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2014_029
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Broadcast journalist Charles Thomas was born on May 3, 1951 in Webster Groves, Missouri to Clarence and Oneida Thomas. He grew up in the St. Louis area and graduated with his B.A. degree from the University of Missouri's School of Journalism in 1973.

Upon graduation, Thomas was hired as a broadcast journalist, and worked as a reporter in Kansas City, Missouri before being hired at KGO-TV in San Francisco, California in 1978. In 1982, he was hired as a reporter for WCAU-TV in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Then, in 1986, Thomas joined WTAF-TV as a general assignment reporter until 1988, when he joined the ABC News bureau in St. Louis, Missouri as a Midwest correspondent. Thomas was then hired as a general assignment reporter by ABC 7 News in Chicago in 1991.

Thomas has worked for ABC 7 on the O.J. Simpson trials, the Oklahoma City bombing, the Rodney King trials, and the Chicago White Sox 2005 World Series Championship. He has reported from Europe and Asia for ABC 7, and, in 2006, accompanied then U.S. Senator Barack Obama to Africa. In all, Thomas has traveled to every state in the United States and to five continents during his journalism career. In 2009, he was promoted to the position of political reporter at ABC 7.

Thomas has won two Emmy Awards for reporting: one in 1983, and another in 1992. He has been a member of Alpha Phi Alpha since 1969.

Thomas and his wife Maria live in downtown Chicago. They are the parents of two adult sons and one adult daughter.

Charles Thomas was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on January 24, 2014.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Charles Thomas was conducted by Larry Crowe on January 24, 2014 and January 25, 2014, in Chicago, Illinois, and was recorded on 10 uncompressed MOV digital video files. Broadcast journalist Charles Thomas (1951 -) has been a reporter for Chicago's ABC 7 News for over twenty years. He was named ABC 7's political reporter in 2009.

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:

Thomas, Charles, 1951-

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Thomas, Charles, 1951---Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Broadcast Journalist

HistoryMakers® Category:

MediaMakers

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 Charles Thomas, January 24, 2014 and January 25, 2014. 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 Charles Thomas, Section A2014_029_001_001, TRT: 1:28:45 ?

Charles Thomas was born on May 3, 1951 at St. Louis Maternity Hospital in St. Louis, Missouri. His mother, Oneida Marie Thomas, was born in 1927 to Tilford and Bernice Franklin. Marie Thomas was raised in northern St. Louis and attended Charles H. Sumner High School. Bernice Franklin worked as a salesperson in the Famous-Barr Co. department store while passing as white--black employees were not allowed to work in sales. Her mother was Irish.

Thomas' father, Clarence Edward Thomas, was born in St. Louis in 1915 to Charles Seals and Alby Thomas, and attended Lincoln University in Jefferson City, Missouri. Thomas' paternal great-grandfather, Andrew Thomas, was a factory worker and owned a home in Webster Groves, a St. Louis suburb. Thomas' paternal grandfather, Charles Thomas, was a follower of Marcus Garvey and owned a store in Webster Groves. Thomas' paternal grandmother was a gifted pianist; her family was originally from Alabama. Thomas' paternal grandparents sent all nine of their children to college.

Video Oral History Interview with Charles Thomas, Section A2014_029_001_002, TRT: 2:30:10 ?

Charles Thomas talks about his maternal Irish ancestry and his father's limited understanding of race and ethnicity. His father, Clarence Edward Thomas, attended Douglass High School in Webster Groves, Missouri, a suburb of St. Louis. At the time, Douglass had been one of only two high schools open to black students. A young adult during the Great Depression, Clarence Thomas earned a B.A. degree in economics from Lincoln University in Jefferson City, Missouri. Unable to find employment in his field post-graduation, he worked as a clerk in the post office. Charles Thomas was raised in Webster Groves in close proximity to his extended family; he lived on the same block as his paternal grandparents, aunts, and uncles. His paternal aunts were educators and his youngest paternal uncle owned the largest black-owned development company in St. Louis, W.A. Thomas & Associates. Thomas attended an all-black local elementary school and Webster Groves High School, an integrated high school in Webster Groves.

Video Oral History Interview with Charles Thomas, Section A2014_029_001_003, TRT: 3:28:40 ?

Charles Thomas describes his childhood in Webster Groves, Missouri. As a youth, he delivered the St. Louis Argus, Ebony magazine and Jet magazine to Webster Groves' black communities. Thomas wrote his first newspaper, The Hotline, as an elementary school student. His fifth grade teacher, Henry Givens, was his educational mentor. As a student at Webster Groves High School, he began publishing The Dark Side, a paper that addressed local and national issues of interest to black students. Thomas used The Dark Side to organize a student walkout and to influence the student government election in favor of a black student body presidential candidate. In 1968, Thomas was arrested for entering a Black Nationalist float in the Webster Groves Independence Day parade. That fall, he starred in his high school's production of 'A Raisin in the Sun,' and developed an interest in the dramatic arts. After graduating in 1969, he attended a college preparatory summer program at the University of Missouri in Columbia, Missouri.

Video Oral History Interview with Charles Thomas, Section A2014_029_001_004, TRT: 4:31:01 ?

Charles Thomas describes the aftermath in St. Louis, Missouri following the 1968 assassination of Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. In 1969, Thomas enrolled at University of Missouri in Columbia, Missouri. He performed poorly and transferred to Forest Park Community College in St. Louis in 1970. Thomas returned to the University of Missouri the second semester of his sophomore year and declared a journalism major. He lists African American broadcast journalists in the 1960s, including Fred Porterfield, St. Louis' first African American television news anchor. In college, Thomas hosted a Top 40 radio show. He earned his B.A. degree from the University Of Missouri School Of Journalism in 1973 and was hired full-time to KCMO Talk Radio out of Kansas City, Missouri. Thomas transitioned into television reporting for KCMO and covered the 1976 Republican National Convention. In 1978, he was hired at KGO-TV in San Francisco, California where he covered a story about a shooter

targeting interracial couples.

Video Oral History Interview with Charles Thomas, Section A2014_029_001_005, TRT: 5:32:00 ?

Charles Thomas describes unorthodox news he reported at KGO-TV in San Francisco, California, including coverage of a shooter targeting interracial couples in San Francisco and an interview with a BDSM-practicing couple. Thomas was threatened for his investigation of the shootings and the station provided temporary protective services. However, following a disagreement with management in 1982, Thomas was fired. He joined WCAU-TV in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, where he covered the 1985 MOVE compound bombing by Philadelphia police. Thomas left WCAU temporarily and joined WTAF-TV where he worked as a weekend anchor person. In the interim, he developed Thomas Productions, a freelance reporting company that sold stories to the BET network, the New Jersey Network and Philadelphia news outlets. Thomas reported on a story about Nicaraguan Contras militia training in the U.S. for the New Jersey Network that caught the attention of ABC network and was hired as a national correspondent for ABC in 1988.

Video Oral History Interview with Charles Thomas, Section A2014_029_002_006, TRT: 7:29:38 ?

Charles Thomas joined the ABC news network's Midwest bureau based in St. Louis, Missouri as a national correspondent in 1988. The Thomas family relocated from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania to St. Louis and settled in its Central West End neighborhood. Thomas' father, who had been diagnosed with ALS in the previous October, died by the summer of 1988. In 1989, Thomas was featured as a principal correspondent on the ABC news special, 'Black and White in America.' Thomas and correspondents George Strait and HistoryMaker Carole Simpson examined the status of black people in America in 1989. For this assignment, Thomas lived temporarily with a family in a Chicago, Illinois housing project; Strait's segment covered the Tuskegee Airmen; and Simpson revisited the Kenneth and Mamie Clark doll experiments that examined children's attitudes about race. HistoryMaker Callie Crossley was one of the producers of the special.

Video Oral History Interview with Charles Thomas, Section A2014_029_002_007, TRT: 8:30:52 ?

Charles Thomas covered the Velvet Revolution in Europe, the end of the communist rule in Czechoslovakia in 1989 as an ABC News national correspondent. Thomas describes observing anti-Semitism on-assignment in Europe, and talks about parallels between the experiences of marginalized people globally. Thomas describes how his duties as a national correspondent for the ABC network adversely affected his family--he spent a significant amount of time out of state and country, although he was based in the St. Louis, Missouri bureau. The St. Louis bureau closed in 1991, and Thomas was reassigned to Los Angeles, California as its West Coast correspondent. Thomas ultimately chose not to relocate and was offered a position at WLS-TV, an ABC affiliate, in Chicago, Illinois. He began at WLS as a general assignment reporter in October of 1991. Thomas talks about his early experiences reporting in Chicago, his family's adjustment to relocating, and diversity and programming in network television.

Video Oral History Interview with Charles Thomas, Section A2014_029_002_008, TRT: 9:31:13 ?

Charles Thomas describes a favorite story he covered as an investigative reporter on alcoholism in Kansas City, Missouri. Thomas and a cameraman had followed a crawling amputee into a bar who agreed to an interview and described his struggles with alcoholism and homelessness. In 1991, Thomas was hired as a political reporter for WLS-TV in Chicago, Illinois. He describes an aggressive climate of political reporting in Chicago during the 1980s and 1990s.

Thomas covered the Rodney King trial and riots in Los Angeles, California in 1992, and the O.J. Simpson investigation and trial in 1994, for WLS-TV in Chicago. He describes covering homicides and gang activity in Chicago in the 1990s and critiques former Mayor Richard M. Daley's administration and its poor relationship with black communities in Chicago. Thomas became a political reporter for WLS-TV on January 21, 2009, HistoryMaker President Barack Obama's first full day in office as President of the United States.

Video Oral History Interview with Charles Thomas, Section A2014_029_002_009, TRT: 10:28:56
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Charles Thomas won an Emmy award in 1983 for his coverage of the recession in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania while working for WCAU-TV out of Philadelphia. In 1991, Thomas joined WLS-TV in Chicago, Illinois as a political reporter. Thomas critiques former Mayor Richard M. Daley's administration and its poor relationship to black communities in Chicago, Illinois. He remembers scandals involving the Daley administration, including the 2003 Duff scandal, when the Duff family of Chicago obtained city contracts by falsely claiming their businesses were run by women or minorities. Thomas also talks about former Chicago mayor Harold Washington's legacy and contemporary race relations in Chicago. He describes his plans to create a digital media platform for the next phase of his career. Thomas talks about his preference for reporting over anchoring; he considers what he would have done differently; and he describes his hopes and concerns for contemporary journalists of color.

Video Oral History Interview with Charles Thomas, Section A2014_029_002_010, TRT: 11:29:57
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Charles Thomas lists his favorite political reporters and Chicago politicians he developed strong ties with including HistoryMaker Toni Preckwinkle and HistoryMaker John Stroger, the first African-American president of the Cook County Board of Commissioners. Thomas remembers meeting with HistoryMaker President Barack Obama during his coverage of Rahm Emanuel's departure as White House Chief of Staff, and describes traveling with President Obama on his trip to Kenya in 2006 reporting for WLS-TV. Thomas talks about his family, describes how he would like to be remembered, and reflects upon his legacy.