

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Cordell Reed

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Reed, Cordell, 1938-
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Cordell Reed,
Dates:	July 2, 2002
Bulk Dates:	2002
Physical Description:	6 Betacame SP videocassettes (3:01:49).
Abstract:	Energy executive Cordell Reed (1938 - 2017) was the former senior vice president and nuclear power public spokesman of Commonwealth Edison, serving in three separate departments. Reed also represented ComEd in a 1995 trade mission to South Africa. Reed was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on July 2, 2002, in Chicago, Illinois. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2002_106
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Energy expert Cordell Reed was born on March 26, 1938 in Chicago, Illinois to Carrie Bell and Cleveon Reed. He grew up in a south side housing project and moved on to a remarkable career in Chicago's corporate and civic communities.

Earning a B.S. in mechanical engineering from the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign in 1960, Reed became the third African American with that degree from UIUC. He went to work for Illinois electric company Commonwealth Edison (ComEd). He worked his way up through the ranks and became an executive in 1975, acting as a public spokesman for nuclear power as well as a department manager. Reed was promoted to senior vice president, serving in three separate departments. In 1994, he became ComEd's ethics officer and the chief diversity officer in addition to maintaining responsibility for purchasing materials for the corporation's 10 fossil fuel-fired energy-generating plants. Reed represented ComEd in a 1995 trade mission to South Africa before retiring in 1997.

The Black Engineer of the Year Awards honored Reed with a "Lifetime Achievement" award in 1988 and the American Nuclear Society bestowed the Tommy Thompson Award on him in 1993. He has also been active in corporate America, serving on the board of directors for LaSalle Bank, the Walgreen Company, Underwriters Laboratories and Washington Group International. He is a member of the National Academy of Engineering, engineering honor society Tau Beta Pi, the National Technical Association and the Urban Financial Service Association as well as a fellow of the American Nuclear Society. Other civic organizations that have benefited from his leadership include the John G. Shedd Aquarium, the Illinois Academic Decathlon Association, Cal-Met Village Senior Citizen Housing, the Development Fund for Black Students and the Metropolitan Family Services Advisory Board. Reed and his wife Bernice have five adult children: Derrick, Brian, Steven, Michael and Barry.

Reed passed away on December 4, 2017.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Cordell Reed was conducted by Julieanna L. Richardson on July 2, 2002, in Chicago, Illinois, and was recorded on 6 Betacame SP videocassettes. Energy executive Cordell Reed (1938 - 2017) was the former senior vice president and nuclear power public spokesman of Commonwealth Edison, serving in three separate departments. Reed also represented ComEd in a 1995 trade mission to South Africa.

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:

Reed, Cordell, 1938-

Richardson, Julieanna L. (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Reed, Cordell, 1938---Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Commonwealth Edison Company

Occupations:

Energy Executive

HistoryMakers® Category:

BusinessMakers

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 Cordell Reed, July 2, 2002. 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 Cordell Reed, Section A2002_106_001_001, TRT: 0:30:09 ?

Cordell Reed describes his family background. His father, Clevon Reed, Sr., grew up in Arkansas and moved to Chicago, Illinois in the 1920s. A quiet, gentle man, Reed, Sr. worked in the stockyards. Carrie Bell grew up on a farm outside of Jackson, Tennessee. She met Reed, Sr. at a party in Chicago, Illinois, and the two married in 1935. The couple gave birth to Clevon Reed, Jr. in 1937, and

Cordell Reed on March 26, 1938. In 1941, the Reeds became one of the first families to move into the Ida B. Wells Homes, where Reed played with neighborhood children, swam in nearby parks, and use an on-site laundry facility. In the 1940s, Clevon Reed, Sr. received his elementary school diploma and became an auto mechanic at Yellow Cab Company. The family took road trips often, which exposed Cordell Reed to segregation for the first time. Reed and his brother attended James R. Doolittle Jr. Elementary School. However, Reed suffered from severe asthma and completed much of his elementary education at home.

Video Oral History Interview with Cordell Reed, Section A2002_106_001_002, TRT: 0:31:10 ?

Cordell Reed suffered from severe childhood asthma, which prevented him from playing with neighborhood children and kept him out of school. In fact, his mother paid neighborhood children to keep Reed company. Reed also entertained himself by reading Superman comic strips, watching television shows like Howdy Doody, and focusing on his homework. By high school, Reed's asthma symptoms had lessened. He enrolled at Tilden Technical High School where he studied algebra, trigonometry and geometry. Reed learned of the University of Illinois-Navy Pier (currently the University of Illinois-Chicago) in 1954 during his junior year. As a teenager, Reed was also involved in Metropolitan Community Church, and attended the National Council of Community Churches Reed was elected to the church's Board of Trustees at the age of twenty-two, and served until 1999. He was also a member of the church choir.

Video Oral History Interview with Cordell Reed, Section A2002_106_001_003, TRT: 0:29:36 ?

Cordell Reed graduated from Tilden Technical High School in 1955 and enrolled at the University of Illinois-Navy Pier, currently the University of Illinois-Chicago. He majored in electrical engineering and transferred to the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in 1958. Reed graduated in 1960 as the school's third black electrical engineer. He interviewed with over fifty-eight companies, but received only two offers as many were hesitant to hire him because of his race. Reed became a technical engineer Commonwealth Edison, having to live in two separate worlds. He worked with his colleagues in close-quartered coal-fired generators, helping him to build friendships with those of the opposite race, from 1960-1967.. He performed startup testing at the company's nuclear power plant from 1967-1971, which housed the world's largest nuclear reactor at the time. Reed's fieldwork experience, combined with his ability to relate to others, prepared him for his corporate career.

Video Oral History Interview with Cordell Reed, Section A2002_106_001_004, TRT: 0:31:09 ?

Cordell Reed began working as a technical engineer for Commonwealth Edison in 1960. After working from 1960-1967 with the company's coal-fired generators, he went on to work at ComEd's Dresden nuclear power plant from 1967-1971. At this time, ComEd was exploring nuclear power's potential as a viable energy source, as coal prices in the U.S. were rising. Nuclear power was less expensive than wind power and solar power, and less dangerous than uranium, as well. After the Three Mile Island and Chernobyl nuclear power plant accidents of 1979 and 1986, the nuclear power industry began to lose its credibility. Reed became a spokesman for ComEd regarding the safety of nuclear power during this era. In 1975, Reed became head of the nuclear engineering department at ComEd's LaSalle nuclear power plant. In 1977, Reed rose to Assistant Vice President of Commonwealth Edison, and was responsible for nuclear licensing. In 1979, Reed was tapped to become Vice President and Chief Nuclear Officer of Commonwealth Edison.

Video Oral History Interview with Cordell Reed, Section A2002_106_001_005, TRT: 0:31:04 ?

Despite the oil embargo of 1974, the electric and nuclear industries continued to grow through the 1980s. Commonwealth Edison's criteria for selecting its leadership evolved tremendously from the 1960s to the 1990s, as well. Instead of pinpointing the best engineers to lead the company, ComEd tapped those with soft skills, like the ability to dialogue and delegate, to lead the company. Cordell Reed's possession of these soft skills, as well as his race, made him visible within ComEd and shaped his success. Reed retired as Vice President of Commonwealth Edison in 1997. He remained active in the community, particularly through his church, Metropolitan Community Church. Reed also served on a number of corporate boards, including Walgreen's, the Shedd Aquarium, the Wabash YMCA of Metro Chicago, First National Bank of Chicago, and Washington Group International. Reed talks about the significance of his black identity, and to share his hopes and concerns for the African American community, as well.

Video Oral History Interview with Cordell Reed, Section A2002_106_001_006, TRT: 0:28:41 ?

As Commonwealth Edison entered a restructuring phase in 1997, Cordell Reed chose to retire at the age of fifty-nine to take care of his parents, Carrie Bell and Cleveon Reed, Sr., and to focus on his life. Carrie Bell Reed passed away from Alzheimer's disease in 2000. Reed comments on the contemporary challenges of blacks in Corporate America and corporate responsibility. He also shares his concerns for the future of the power industry. Cordell Reed closes the interview by narrating his photographs.