

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Erma L. Clanton

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## Overview of the Collection

<b>Repository:</b>	The HistoryMakers® 1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
<b>Creator:</b>	Clanton, Erma, 1923-
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Erma L. Clanton,
<b>Dates:</b>	June 26, 2003
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2003
<b>Physical Description:</b>	5 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:23:06).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Playwright, high school english teacher, and theater professor Erma L. Clanton (1923 - 2021) wrote plays that showed in Memphis for over thirty years. Clanton was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on June 26, 2003, in Memphis, Tennessee. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2003_145
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Playwright, lyricist and teacher Erma Clanton was born in Memphis, Tennessee, on February 5, 1923, the fourth of eight children. After graduating from Booker T. Washington High School in Memphis, Clanton went to Alabama State University in Montgomery, where she earned a B.S. in 1945. She would later go on to earn a master's of theater and communication from the University of Memphis in 1969 and a doctor of humane letters from the Tennessee School of Religion in 2001.

After completing her bachelor's degree, Clanton went to work teaching English and speech at Melrose High School in Memphis, where she remained until 1969. During that time, she was actively involved in several productions performed by her students. In 1970, Clanton became an associate professor at the University of Memphis, where she taught theater and communications. Also during this time, Clanton began creating her own work, with her first piece, *Roots, Rhymes & Righteous Times (An Evening of Soul)* performed at the University of Memphis in 1971 and continuing under her direction until 1991. She went on to create and direct many more shows over the years, including *Listen Children*, *God's Trombones*, *Black Pearls of the World*, and *Gifted & Black - On the Right Track*. Along with her creation and direction of the shows, Clanton also writes original music. Clanton retired from the University of Memphis in 1991, yet continued to direct her new shows both in Memphis and elsewhere. In 1997 and 1998, she worked with gifted at-risk students at Hamilton High School, and then in 1999 Clanton taught one semester at Le Moyne Owen College.

In addition to her creative exploits, Clanton is active in a number of organizations, including serving as the chairperson of the Evening of Soul Foundation, a board member of Stax/Soulsville USA at the Museum of American Soul Music, and is a twenty-five-year member of the NAACP. She has received the Dr. Martin Luther King Distinguished Service Award from the University of Memphis and the Bronze Jubilee Award from PBS Radio & TV.

Clanton passed away on August 24, 2021.

## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Erma L. Clanton was conducted by Larry Crowe on June 26, 2003, in Memphis, Tennessee, and was recorded on 5 Betacame SP videocassettes. Playwright, high school english teacher, and theater professor Erma L. Clanton (1923 - 2021) wrote plays that showed in Memphis for over thirty years.

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## 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®.

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## 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.

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## Controlled Access Terms

This interview collection is indexed under the following controlled access subject terms.

### Persons:

Clanton, Erma, 1923-

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

### Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Clanton, Erma, 1923---Interviews

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## Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

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The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

## Occupations:

Arts Administrator

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## HistoryMakers® Category:

ArtMakers

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## 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 Erma L. Clanton, June 26, 2003. 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).

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## 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.

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## Detailed Description of the Collection

### Series I: Original Interview Footage

Video Oral History Interview with Erma L. Clanton, Section A2003\_145\_001\_001, TRT: 0:28:36 ?

Erma L. Clanton was born on February 5, 1923 in Memphis, Tennessee to Josephine Smith Clanton and Saul Edward Clanton. The Clanton family has roots in Great Britain. Clanton's paternal grandparents worked as farmers in Lexington, Mississippi, however, Clanton knows little of her maternal family history. Clanton's father worked as a plumber in Memphis. De facto discrimination prevented him from obtaining a professional license as a plumber, resulting in being paid less than other white plumbers. Her mother worked as a domestic laborer in addition to caring for Clanton and her seven

siblings. Clanton recalls the lessons her parents taught her as a child. She describes living on 1088 South Orleans Street in Memphis, the same street that Reverend Benjamin Hooks lived on and attending LaRose Elementary School. She also recalls the dewberry vines that grew in the family's backyard.

Video Oral History Interview with Erma L. Clanton, Section A2003\_145\_001\_002, TRT: 0:28:46 ?

Erma L. Clanton attended Memphis, Tennessee's LaRose Elementary School in the 1930s before attending Booker T. Washington High School, where Lucie Campbell and Nat D. Williams mentored her. In the twelfth grade, the high school principal encouraged her to participate in an oratorical contest. She won the local competition with a recitation of 'Thanatopsis' and then won a scholarship to Alabama State University in Montgomery, Alabama after impressing the university president with her oratorical skills. Clanton attended Alabama State University during World War II. On Sunday afternoons, she attended a music appreciation hour; listening to spirituals and classical music influenced her later tastes. She also participated in theatrical productions and served as president for a college Christian association. After graduating in 1945, she returned to Memphis to teach at Melrose High School in the Orange Mound neighborhood. Clanton also talks about the history of oratory in the African American community.

Video Oral History Interview with Erma L. Clanton, Section A2003\_145\_001\_003, TRT: 0:29:50 ?

Erma L. Clanton met George Washington Carver on a trip to Tuskegee University as an undergraduate student at Alabama State University in Montgomery, Alabama. She also attended a performance by Paul Robeson at Tuskegee. In 1945, Clanton graduated from Alabama State with her bachelor's degree and enrolled in summer theater courses at Columbia University in New York City. She recalls attending a Broadway performance of 'Tea and Sympathy.' Clanton then returned to Memphis, Tennessee to teach English and speech at Melrose High School where she taught for twenty-four years. In 1969, Clanton began her master's in theater and communication at the University of Memphis. After teaching at-risk youth in a summer theater program, the university hired her as an associate professor. A production of 'Hair' at the University of Memphis inspired Clanton to create 'Roots, Rhymes & Righteous Times (An Evening of Soul).' Clanton talks about African American vernacular English and the oratorical traditions of the black church.

Video Oral History Interview with Erma L. Clanton, Section A2003\_145\_001\_004, TRT: 0:29:30 ?

Erma L. Clanton developed 'Roots, Rhymes & Righteous Times (An Evening of Soul)' after a student group performed 'Hair' at the University of Memphis in Tennessee. The play created an opportunity for black students to perform at the University of Memphis. Clanton turned to HistoryMaker B.B. King and Aretha Franklin as two musical influences. Songs in 'An Evening of Soul' addressed the history of slavery, the relationship between the black church and music, romance, and the family as well as Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and the fight for freedom. After performing in a 1972 production of 'An Evening of Soul,' HistoryMaker Isaac Hayes became good friends with Clanton. In 2001, some original performers gathered for a thirtieth anniversary performance at the University of Memphis. Clanton worked as the dramaturgical minister at her church, where she produced an annual Easter pageant and other theater pieces. She describes her hopes and concerns for the African American community.

Video Oral History Interview with Erma L. Clanton, Section A2003\_145\_001\_005, TRT: 0:26:24 ?

Erma L. Clanton talks about people she has influenced, including her adopted daughter. She reflects upon what she may have done differently in life, and her legacy as an educator. Clanton concludes by describing how she would like to be

remembered and narrating her photographs.