

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Mildred Cruzat

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Cruzat, Mildred, 1927-
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Mildred Cruzat,
Dates:	August 26, 2003
Bulk Dates:	2003
Physical Description:	6 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:35:41).
Abstract:	Civic leader Mildred Cruzat (1927 - 2021) was a performer on the Spider Burks TV Show, the first African American television show in St. Louis, a dancer in the Joseph Holmes Dance Theatre and owner of the Millie Cruzat Total Fitness Center in Chicago. Cruzat was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on August 26, 2003, in Chicago, Illinois. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2003_206
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Mildred Cruzat was born in Detroit, Michigan on February 17, 1927. The third of four children, she attended public schools in Detroit and then spent a year at Highland Park Junior College in Detroit. Following that, she went to New York, where she attended the American School of Ballet at Carnegie Hall.

While studying in New York, Cruzat worked as a sales associate at Bloomingdale's, but after completing her ballet training she joined the Larry Steele Smart Affair dance troupe, based in New York and Atlantic City, New Jersey. In 1950, she went to Ziggy Johnson's School of Ballet in her native Detroit, where she became an instructor. That same year she also performed with Shuffle Along in a Broadway performance. Cruzat's next destination was St. Louis, where in 1951 she worked as a performer on the *Spider Burke TV Show*, the first African American television show in the St. Louis market. After her departure from the program, Cruzat spent many years raising her three children.

Cruzat resumed dancing in 1975, working with the Joseph Holmes Dance Theatre in Chicago, where she stayed for five years. In 1981, Cruzat joined the Tony Wilson Dance Company and the Bell School of Performing Arts as an instructor of children's and adult ballet and fitness. Cruzat joined the Chicago Urban League in 1983, working in the Young Parents Center, teaching fitness and dance to young mothers. That same year, she opened the Millie Cruzat Total Fitness Center, where she is still an instructor to all ages for fitness and dance. Cruzat joined the COPE program at the University of Chicago in 1985 as an instructor of dance for teenagers with children. In 1987, Cruzat joined the Beethoven Elementary School staff as a ballet instructor and remained there for eight years, and in 1992, was hired by Lake Meadows Fitness Center as an instructor. She held that position until 1995. In 2002, Cruzat joined the Stewart Modeling Agency, where she continues to work as a model.

In addition to owning her own fitness center, modeling and instructing, Cruzat was active in a number of organizations. She was a member of the Rainbow/PUSH Coalition, and she served on the boards of the Joseph

Holmes Dance Troupe and the Katherine Dunham Retrospective. She was an avid tennis player, and in 1973 was a quarterfinalist in the Women's 35 Singles at the American Tennis Association National Championships. She devoted her life to fostering the development of African American children through dance and fitness. Cruzat lived in Chicago. She had three children.

Cruzat was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on August 26, 2003.

Cruzat passed away on July 28, 2021.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Mildred Cruzat was conducted by Larry Crowe on August 26, 2003, in Chicago, Illinois, and was recorded on 6 Betacame SP videocassettes. Civic leader Mildred Cruzat (1927 - 2021) was a performer on the Spider Burks TV Show, the first African American television show in St. Louis, a dancer in the Joseph Holmes Dance Theatre and owner of the Millie Cruzat Total Fitness Center in Chicago.

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:

Cruzat, Mildred, 1927-

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews
Cruzat, Mildred, 1927---Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Civic Leader

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 Mildred Cruzat, August 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).

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 Mildred Cruzat, Section A2003_206_001_001, TRT: 0:30:20 ?

Mildred Cruzat was born on February 17, 1927 in Detroit, Michigan. Her mother, Florence Richerson was born in New York City, New York on February 8, 1904 to Mildred Shelby Richerson and Redrick Newsom and raised in Detroit. Few details are known about Cruzat's maternal family, but they can trace their lineage back to the Shelby family, who were related to the first Governor of Kentucky, Isaac Shelby. Cruzat's father, Sevar Baldwin Clemon, was born in Montgomery, Alabama on July 4, 1899. Cruzat's parents met when her mother was seventeen in Detroit, where they lived on the West Side and owned a haberdashery and cleaners. Around 1931, Cruzat and her sister were sent to live with their aunt in Montgomery, Alabama for a year during the Great Depression. There, they experienced segregation and were washed in Lysol by their aunt. After returning to Detroit, Cruzat remembers playing with the children of other black professionals in the area.

Video Oral History Interview with Mildred Cruzat, Section A2003_206_001_002, TRT: 0:30:20 ?

Mildred Cruzat was raised in Detroit, Michigan, where her mother Florence Richerson encouraged her with trips to the Fox Theatre, Cass Theatre, Detroit Museum of Arts, Belle Isle, and various ballet companies. Cruzat remembers visiting Hudson's department store and the black-owned Gotham Hotel, as well as seeing and hearing performers like Marian Anderson, Paul Robeson, and Maria Tallchief. She attended Alger Elementary School and developed a fondness for the local Jewish market. Cruzat's grandmother, Mildred Shelby Richerson, worked as a domestic for the Stroh family, who made Stroh's beer and were able to expose Cruzat to a wealthy lifestyle. Her sister, Mary Ann Bailer, took ballet classes which required her to pass for white. Cruzat's childhood interests included paper dolls, sports, and fantasy, and Cruzat danced in a group called "The Lilly Children" with HistoryMaker Lloyd Richards. In 1947, Cruzat moved to New York City, where she saw dancers like HistoryMaker Katherine Dunham.

Video Oral History Interview with Mildred Cruzat, Section A2003_206_001_003, TRT: 0:30:10 ?

Mildred Cruzat attended Northern High School and Northeastern High School in Detroit, Michigan, where she often passed for white. She became president of the "Delt Strites," a high school group affiliated with the Delta Sigma Theta Sorority. She also became interested in tennis. Cruzat remembers seeing HistoryMaker Ruby Dee in a touring production of "Anna Lucasta" and going on a date with HistoryMaker Ossie Davis. Cruzat attended Highland Park Junior College for one year while working at the post office before moving to New York City in 1947. In New York, Cruzat worked at Bloomingdale's while attending dance school at Carnegie Hall. She lived in Freddie Dee Brown's apartment in Harlem, where she met Lionel Hampton, Althea Gibson, Lena Horne, and Sidney Poitier as well as HistoryMakers Gordon Parks and Harry Belafonte. In 1949, Cruzat joined Larry Steele's "Smart Affairs." She also danced as a chorus girl in various shows, including on the Ed Sullivan Show and in the 1952 revival of "Shuffle Along."

Video Oral History Interview with Mildred Cruzat, Section A2003_206_001_004, TRT: 0:30:25 ?

Mildred Cruzat describes the experiences of black performers in New York City and Los Angeles, California, including Sammy Davis, Jr.; Lena Horne; Dorothy Dandridge, and HistoryMaker Fayard Nicholas. She also reflects on seeing HistoryMaker Katherine Dunham's dancers and how little they are recognized for their performances. Cruzat talks about Dunham's dancers Tommy Gomez and Randson Boykin and her experience working with both. In the early 1950s,

Cruzat acted in a Jesse “Spider” Burks’ TV show in St. Louis, Missouri. In 1954, Cruzat married Edward Pedro Cruzat, a St. Louis doctor, in Detroit, Michigan. For the next twenty years, Cruzat was devoted to raising her children in Chicago, Illinois. In 1975, she joined the Joseph Holmes Dance Company; and, in 1980, she left and began teaching her own fitness classes in Chicago, Illinois. She opened the Mildred Cruzat Total Fitness Center in 1983 and began teaching dance at Beethoven Elementary School (part of the Robert Taylor Homes) in Chicago in 1987.

Video Oral History Interview with Mildred Cruzat, Section A2003_206_001_005, TRT: 0:30:05 ?

Mildred Cruzat taught at Beethoven High School (part of the Robert Taylor Homes) in Chicago, Illinois from 1987 until 1995, when her husband, Edward Pedro Cruzat, was diagnosed with pulmonary fibrosis and given an estimated five years to live. He died in 2000. Cruzat describes the careers of her three children, Sevara Pia Cruzat, Edward Pedro Cruzat, Jr., and Liza Cruzat-Brooks. She reflects on her concerns for more positive representations of African Americans in the media, and talks about the career of her brother-in-law, actor Al Freeman, Jr., and the U.S. Senate campaign of HistoryMaker and future President Barack Obama. Cruzat ends the interview by reflecting on her legacy and narrating her photographs.

Video Oral History Interview with Mildred Cruzat, Section A2003_206_001_006, TRT: 0:04:21 ?

Mildred Cruzat continues to narrate her photographs.