

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Amazon Brooks

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Brooks, Amazon, 1897-2007
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Amazon Brooks,
Dates:	August 25, 2004
Bulk Dates:	2004
Physical Description:	5 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:27:50).
Abstract:	Domestic Amazon Brooks (1897 - 2007) began voting in 1920, the year women gained the right to vote. She was Chicago's oldest living voter until her death on February 23, 2007. Brooks was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on August 25, 2004, in Chicago, Illinois. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2004_143
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Amazon Brooks was born in Arcola, Mississippi on November 26, 1897. Her maternal grandparents were slaves in Alabama, and her mother, Ella, was born in 1871, just a few years after the end of the Civil War. Her father, Thomas Duncan, hailed from Louisiana. She attended the Trail Lake School in Mt. Airy, and then later attended the Free School in Mound Bayou.

Brooks traveled north to Chicago in 1915 to help family members and to try to find greater opportunities for herself. The cost of her journey to the North was only \$17.00. Once in Chicago, Brooks found work as a chambermaid at the Congress Hotel, and in 1933, during the World's Fair, she began working in a laundry mat that provided linens and towels to hotels, and she would remain there for most of her working years. In 1938, Brooks joined the Antioch Missionary Baptist Church in Chicago.

Brooks' most notable achievement, however, was that she voted in her first election in 1920, the year women were granted the right to vote, and she continued to do so in almost every election since then. Even more of a rarity, since the 1932 election when she voted for Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Brooks voted on a straight Democratic ticket.

Brooks passed away on February, 23, 2007 at age 109.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Amazon Brooks was conducted by Larry Crowe on August 25, 2004, in Chicago, Illinois, and was recorded on 5 Betacame SP videocassettes. Domestic Amazon Brooks (1897 - 2007) began voting in 1920, the year women gained the right to vote. She was Chicago's oldest living voter until her death on February 23, 2007.

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:

Brooks, Amazon, 1897-2007

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Brooks, Amazon, 1897-2007--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Domestic

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 Amazon Brooks, August 25, 2004. 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 Amazon Brooks, Section A2004_143_001_001, TRT: 0:29:20 ?

Amazon Brooks was born on November 26, 1897 in Arcola, Mississippi. Her mother, Ellen Knighten, was born in Alabama around 1870 and her parents were formerly enslaved in Green County, Alabama. Brooks says her maternal grandparents spoke well of their former slave master. The family farmed, raising cotton and corn as cash crops, along with a variety of vegetables. Her elders did not believe in ghosts but told her African American folktales such as that of two men counting nuts in a graveyard. Brooks' maternal grandfather was possibly Malagasy, descended from the tribe in Madagascar. He was a kind man who regretted not running away to fight in the Civil War. His mother moved from Alabama to live with the family in Mississippi. When Brooks was about a month old, her family moved to a small town, possibly Shelby, Mississippi. When she was seven years old, they moved to Mound Bayou, Mississippi, a town founded by former slaves from Davis Bend, a plantation owned by Jefferson Davis's brother.

Video Oral History Interview with Amazon Brooks, Section A2004_143_001_002, TRT: 0:28:40 ?

Amazon Brooks had a neighbor with a bayou on his land when she was growing up in Mississippi. She fished there as a child and had to dig to find worms for bait, an activity she did not like. Brooks did not know her father, Thomas Duncan, although she heard that he worked for a man named Dr. Cheeks in Arcola, Mississippi and later in life, returned to his home state of Louisiana. Her stepfather, Emmanuel Coleman, had a larger presence in her life. His first wife died, and he had three children from that marriage. Brooks' mother attended a Baptist church and her stepfather attended Porters Chapel Methodist Church in Vicksburg, Mississippi where he sang. Brooks attended school in a church house prior to the family's move to Mound Bayou when she was seven, where she went to public school. Brooks remembers the first time she saw an automobile and talks about her childhood personality and activities.

Video Oral History Interview with Amazon Brooks, Section A2004_143_001_003, TRT: 0:30:20 ?

Amazon Brooks lived in Mound Bayou, Mississippi from age seven to seventeen. She recalls the town's founder, Isaiah T. Montgomery, and others from the town, including the family of HistoryMaker Harold Pates. Brooks moved to Chicago, Illinois when she was seventeen. There, she lived with her maternal uncle and helped raise his children. When she arrived in Chicago in 1915, the streetcar cost a nickel and she was able to buy bread for the same price. Brooks married in 1919 and later divorced. She began to vote in 1920, when women's suffrage was achieved. Brooks recalls that African American men in the all-black Mound Bayou voted in local elections long before the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Brooks shares memories of her uncle's wife and children, including her cousin Reverend William Howard Knighten, who pastored Progressive Community Church in Chicago, and her infant cousin who died in 1917. She also recalls her short-lived first marriage and its subsequent dissolution.

Video Oral History Interview with Amazon Brooks, Section A2004_143_001_004, TRT: 0:30:00 ?

Amazon Brooks was subject to her parents' rules when she moved to Chicago, Illinois from Mound Bayou, Mississippi in 1915 at the age of seventeen. Brooks married a Mr. Brooks in 1917, had a son, and later divorced. She was not present for the Chicago Race Riot of 1919. Brooks worked in restaurants and in the Congress Hotel and Palmer House Hotel as a housekeeper and laundress. She recalls seeing President Theodore Roosevelt in the Congress Hotel in 1918 and talks about her uniforms. As a young woman in Chicago, she did not have much leisure time but enjoyed listening to Arthur Godfrey and reading the Chicago Defender and Chicago Bee. Brooks was aware of prominent African Americans such as Booker T. Washington and Timothy Thomas Fortune; she also recalls Marcus Garvey and members of his Pan-Africanism movement. In 1950, Brooks remarried a man from Memphis, Tennessee with three children between the ages of fifteen and ten. Brooks was not fond of her stepchildren and the marriage lasted briefly.

Video Oral History Interview with Amazon Brooks, Section A2004_143_001_005, TRT: 0:29:30 ?

Amazon Brooks helped raise a beloved cousin from a young age after his mother died. She witnessed the shift in African Americans' political party affiliations from Republican to Democrat. She remembers black politicians in Chicago, Illinois, including Ralph Metcalfe, Sr., William L. Dawson, and Mayor Harold Washington. She regrets that she was not able to pursue an education since she had to work at such a young age, and urges young people today to take advantage of their educational opportunities. She also talks about her son, William Brooks, and considers how she might have raised him differently.

Brooks reflects upon her place in the world in her old age and offers life advice to younger generations. She also reflects upon the importance of history and how she would like to be remembered. Brooks concludes by narrating her photographs.