

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with James Cameron

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Cameron, James, 1914-2006
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with James Cameron,
Dates:	July 14, 2005
Bulk Dates:	2005
Physical Description:	4 Betacame SP videocassettes (1:37:58).
Abstract:	Civil rights activist and museum chief executive James Cameron (1914 - 2006) was the founder of America's Black Holocaust Museum in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Cameron survived a lynching as a youth. Cameron was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on July 14, 2005, in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2005_163
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

James Cameron, founder of America's Black Holocaust Museum, was born February 23, 1914, in LaCrosse, Wisconsin, to James Herbert Cameron and Vera Carter. When Cameron's father left the family the family moved to Birmingham, Alabama, and later to Kokomo, Indiana. When his mother remarried, Cameron resettled in Marion, Indiana. Cameron attended DaPayne School through the 8th grade where he was given the name Apples because he carried apples in his pockets for lunch. On the night of August 7, 1930, Cameron's friends Abe Smith, nineteen, and Tommy Shipp, eighteen, tried to hold up a white couple at the local Lovers' Lane. The Grant County Sheriff arrested Cameron charging him and his friends with murder; the Ku Klux Klan stormed the jail and tried to lynch the trio. During the altercation, Cameron passed out; his two friends were lynched but Cameron's life was spared.

Although Madame C.J. Walker sent him two NAACP lawyers from Indianapolis, Cameron was convicted in his 1931 trial as an accessory. Paroled in 1935, Cameron moved to Detroit, Michigan, where he worked for Stroh's Brewing Company and attended Wayne State University. In Madison, Wisconsin, Cameron founded the local branch of the NAACP and founded two more chapters in Muncie and South Bend, Indiana.

In 1983, Cameron mortgaged his house in order to publish his memoir, *A Time of Terror*. In 1988, with the assistance of philanthropist Daniel Bader, Cameron founded America's Black Holocaust Museum, a non-profit devoted to preserving the history of lynching in the United States and the struggle to eradicate it. Located in a twelve thousand square-foot gym purchased for one dollar from the City of Milwaukee, Wisconsin, the museum contains artifacts from slavery, stereotypes, lynching postcards, and photographs. America's Black Holocaust Museum is visited annually by thousands of school children. Cameron appeared on ABC television's *Nightline*, and scores of other television programs. In 1991, Cameron was officially pardoned by the State of Indiana.

Cameron passed away on June 11, 2006 at age 92.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with James Cameron was conducted by Larry Crowe on July 14, 2005, in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and was recorded on 4 Betacame SP videocassettes. Civil rights activist and museum chief executive James Cameron (1914 - 2006) was the founder of America's Black Holocaust Museum in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Cameron survived a lynching as a youth.

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:

Cameron, James, 1914-2006

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews
Cameron, James, 1914-2006--Interviews

African American civil rights workers--Interviews

Museum directors--Wisconsin--Milwaukee--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

America's Black Holocaust Museum

Occupations:

Museum Chief Executive

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 James Cameron, July 14, 2005. 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 James Cameron, Section A2005_163_001_001, TRT: 0:30:50 ?

James Cameron was born February 23, 1914 in LaCrosse, Wisconsin. Cameron's mother, Vera Carter, born in Birmingham, Alabama, was one of twelve children. His father, James Herbert Cameron, was born in Indianapolis, Indiana and worked as a barber. Cameron's parents met at Bethel A.M.E. Church in Indianapolis. After Cameron's birth, the family moved to Birmingham. His parents divorced and his mother worked to support Cameron and his siblings. After twelve years, Cameron and his family relocated to Kokomo, then Marion, Indiana, where Cameron worked on a farm and his mother remarried Hezekiah Burden, a Native American man. When he was sixteen, Cameron and his friends, Thomas Shipp and Abraham Smith, were kidnapped, assaulted and hung by a lynch mob. Though Shipp and Smith were killed, Cameron survived. Cameron recalls the white lynch mob storming Grant County Jail in Marion, his time in protective police custody after his attempted lynching, and his stepfather's retaliatory shooting at the Marion police.

African American civil rights workers--Interviews.

Museum directors--Wisconsin--Milwaukee--Interviews.

Video Oral History Interview with James Cameron, Section A2005_163_001_002, TRT: 0:28:08 ?

James Cameron was given a ride home by Thomas Shipp and Abraham Smith on the night of August 6, 1930. Informed of their plans for a robbery, Cameron asked to be let out of the car, but was refused. The trio came upon a parked vehicle in Lovers Lane in Marion, Indiana. Smith handed a gun to Cameron and told him to hold up the passengers. Upon realizing he knew the victims, Claude Dieter and his fiancée Mary Ball, Cameron fled the scene. He was arrested at home that same night, accused of murder and rape. Cameron confessed what he witnessed that evening. When told to sign a statement, Cameron was attacked by police for trying to read what they had written. A lynch mob kidnapped Shipp and Smith, then demanded the other prisoners identify Cameron. Although the jailed men first refused, a father whose son was in danger of being mistaken for Cameron pointed him out. The mob beat all three, killing the first two men. When rescued, Cameron was transferred to a jail in Anderson, Indiana and held there to await trial.

Video Oral History Interview with James Cameron, Section A2005_163_001_003, TRT: 0:30:00 ?

James Cameron was jailed for almost a year before his trial. Sheriff Bernard Bailey was determined not to let another mob attack him. Bailey made Cameron a trustee, which meant he had to acquire supplies for the prisoners. When his case went to trial, his lawyers, Robert L. Brokenburr and Robert L. Bailey, were able to have four of the five charges against him dropped. However, Cameron was found guilty of being an accessory before the fact and sentenced to serve between two to twenty-one years. Sympathetic inmates protected Cameron during his time in prison. After several appeals, Cameron was paroled in 1935 and subsequently went to live with his aunt in Detroit, Michigan. There, he worked a series of odd jobs from milk man to soda jerk to plumbing assistant, eventually leaving his aunt's home. He also attended Bethel A.M.E. Church and its Sunday school under the tutelage of Reverend William H. Peck. While in Detroit, Cameron met and married his wife, Virginia Hamilton Cameron.

Video Oral History Interview with James Cameron, Section A2005_163_001_004, TRT: 0:09:00 ?

James Cameron lived in Detroit, Michigan in the mid-1930s. He remembers a boycott of Stroh's Brewing Company in 1936 to protest their discriminatory hiring practices. Inspired by professionals at Bethel A.M.E. Church and wanting to increase his career prospects, Cameron attended Wayne State University for a semester in 1937. He studied shorthand and typing; however, the types of jobs he wanted were usually not open to African Americans at the time. In 1937, he

attended the world heavyweight champion boxing match between James J. Braddock and Joe Louis. At the match, he stood next to U.S. Congressman Oscar DePriest and saw Chicago, Illinois erupt in celebration when Louis won. Cameron lived in the Black Bottom neighborhood of Detroit, near the house that Joe Louis bought for his mother. He wed Virginia Hamilton Cameron on May 15, 1938, and at the time of the interview, they had been married sixty-six years.