

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with J. Herman Blake

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Blake, J. Herman
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with J. Herman Blake,
Dates:	January 31, 2007
Bulk Dates:	2007
Physical Description:	8 Betacame SP videocassettes (3:42:44).
Abstract:	University president and sociology professor J. Herman Blake (1934 -) was the president of Tougaloo College, and was a tenured member of the the University of California Santa Cruz faculty for eighteen years. Blake also authored the Huey P. Newton biography, "Revolutionary Suicide," and is a well-respected as a leading authority on Gullah culture. Blake was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on January 31, 2007, in Beaufort, South Carolina. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2007_036
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Born John Herman Blake on March 15, 1934, Blake grew up in Mount Vernon, New York, as one of seven children raised by his single mother, Lylace E. Blake. Blake's family lived in poverty, surviving only by welfare. Blake's mother encouraged each of her children to participate and excel in school; all seven children completed high school; six received bachelor's degrees; five achieved master's degrees; and two earned doctorate degrees.

After serving in the U.S. Army during the Korean War, Blake continued his education with the assistance of the G.I. Bill; he enrolled in New York University in 1955, and received his B.A. degree in sociology in 1960. Blake went on to receive his M.A. degree and his Ph.D. in sociology from the University of California at Berkeley. In 1966, Blake, as the Assistant Professor of Sociology, became the first African American on the University of California Santa Cruz faculty. During his eighteen year tenure, Blake also served as the Founding Provost of Oakes College at the University of California Santa Cruz.

After leaving the University of California Santa Cruz, Blake served as the President of Tougaloo College until 1987; held positions at Swarthmore College; served as the Vice Chancellor at Indiana University; and served as the Director of African American Studies at Iowa State University. In 2002, Blake was named Iowa Professor of the Year and received an Honorary Degree from Indiana University. In addition to his career in education, Blake published several projects including *Revolutionary Suicide*, an autobiography of Huey P. Newton, which was the result of his research on black militants in urban areas.

Blake also researched many other topics; his work made him a leading authority on the Gullah culture. Additionally, Blake served as the Scholar in Residence and Director of the Sea Island Institute at the University of South Carolina, Beaufort, an institution whose primary focus is the study and promotion of Gullah Cultures. In

2008, the Medical University of South Carolina appointed Blake as the first Humanities Scholar in Residence. Blake served as an advisor to the University's Humanities Committee and to the President and Provost on matters of cultural enrichment.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with J. Herman Blake was conducted by Denise Gines on January 31, 2007, in Beaufort, South Carolina, and was recorded on 8 Betacame SP videocassettes. University president and sociology professor J. Herman Blake (1934 -) was the president of Tougaloo College, and was a tenured member of the the University of California Santa Cruz faculty for eighteen years. Blake also authored the Huey P. Newton biography, "Revolutionary Suicide," and is a well-respected as a leading authority on Gullah culture.

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:

Blake, J. Herman

Gines, Denise (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Blake, J. Herman--Interviews

African American college administrators--Interviews

African American educators--Interviews

African American historians--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Sociology Professor

University President

HistoryMakers® Category:

EducationMakers

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 J. Herman Blake, January 31, 2007. 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 J. Herman Blake, Section A2007_036_001_001, TRT: 0:28:32 ?

J. Herman Blake was born on March 15, 1934 in Mount Vernon, New York to Lylace Michael Blake and Joseph Henry Blake, Sr. Blake's paternal ancestors were slaves on the Manigault plantation near the mouth of the Savannah River. In 1887, his ancestor, Lydia Manigault, purchased twenty-six acres of land on Johns Island, South Carolina, where Blake's father was born. As an adult, Blake's father worked at Fort Slocum in New Rochelle, New York, and was a deacon in the local Seventh-day Adventist church. Prior to meeting Blake's mother, he had a son, William Blake, whom Blake did not meet until his mother's funeral. When Blake was young, his father left the family, and his maternal grandmother, Margaret Michael, moved from North Carolina to the Bronx and helped Blake's mother raise Blake and his six siblings in Mount Vernon. There, they lived in a tenement, and later in a converted storefront. Unable to graduate from high school, Blake's mother encouraged Blake and his siblings to pursue education.

African American college administrators--Interviews.

African American educators--Interviews.

African American historians--Interviews.

Video Oral History Interview with J. Herman Blake, Section A2007_036_001_002, TRT: 0:28:13 ?

J. Herman Blake's parents separated when he was young, because his father was abusive. Blake then lived for a short time with the family of Thaddeus Wilson, Sr., an elder in the local Seventh-day Adventist church. Wilson's son, Nathaniel Wilson, became Blake's dear friend, and Blake remained close with the family throughout his life. Blake began his education at the Robert Fulton School in Mount Vernon, New York, and then moved to the Nathan Hale School. In the fifth grade, he transferred to Harlem Junior Academy, a Seventh-day Adventist school in New York City, and remained there until graduating from high school. His algebra teacher, Nauford O. Phipps, strengthened Blake's character, and introduced him to African American history. Blake's was inspired to attend college by his older brother, Henry Joseph Blake, Jr. When his brother left school to support their mother, a woman from their church named Lillian Tinsley encouraged him to return, and provided the financial means for him to do so.

Video Oral History Interview with J. Herman Blake, Section A2007_036_001_003, TRT: 0:28:35 ?

J. Herman Blake learned about African American history in New York City's Harlem neighborhood, at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture and Lewis H. Michaux's African National Memorial Bookstore. He attended the Seventh-day Adventist Harlem Junior Academy, while also delivering papers and working in a drugstore. Upon graduating in 1952, he discovered that his diploma was unaccredited, and joined the U.S. Army instead of attending college. He served two years in France, where he earned his GED certificate. After being discharged, Blake married Bessie Jefferson, and enrolled at New York University on a scholarship. There, he studied under historian Alexander Baltzley, social worker Margaret Benz and business professor Timothy Costello. Blake became interested in demography after taking a course with sociologist

Katherine Organski. With her encouragement, Blake was admitted to the graduate program of the University of California, Berkeley through the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation.

Video Oral History Interview with J. Herman Blake, Section A2007_036_001_004, TRT: 0:28:41 ?

J. Herman Blake completed his Ph.D. degree at the University of California, Berkeley, where he served as the NAACP chapter president. In 1961, Blake met Malcolm X, who was speaking on campus, and became involved with the Black Panther Party. During this time, Blake criticized Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr.'s rhetoric, although he later came to agree with King's nonviolent philosophy. Blake also met Huey P. Newton through his activism. At Newton's trial for the killing of John Frey, Blake testified about the culture of black grassroots activism on behalf of the defense. After Newton was incarcerated, Blake visited him in prison, where they talked about philosophy and other scholarly topics. Newton's mother, Armelia Johnson Newton, convinced Blake to coauthor Newton's autobiography, 'Revolutionary Suicide.' For the project, Blake sought the advice of author Alex Haley, who coauthored 'The Autobiography of Malcolm X.' Blake's mother's health declined after a stroke in 1958, and she passed away in 1965.

Video Oral History Interview with J. Herman Blake, Section A2007_036_001_005, TRT: 0:29:14 ?

J. Herman Blake was hired as an assistant professor of demography at the University of California, Santa Cruz. From 1967, Blake studied the work of Septima Poinsette Clark, Bernice Robinson and Myles Horton in the Sea Islands on behalf of the Emil Schwarzhaut Foundation. He worked with South Carolinian community organizer Esau Jenkins and politician Herbert U. Fielding, and sent students from the university on service projects to Daufuskie Island and other islands along the South Carolina coast. Students lived with residents, and worked on projects like Thomas Barnwell's Hilton Head Fishing Cooperative. After the assassination of Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. in 1968, the university moved to create a multicultural college. In 1969, Blake was invited to lead the planning committee, which included professors Rafael Guzman, Dilip Basu, Roberto Crespi and William T. Doyle. Oakes College opened in 1972, and its curriculum included a required course on the philosophy of communication, which Blake designed.

Video Oral History Interview with J. Herman Blake, Section A2007_036_001_006, TRT: 0:28:16 ?

J. Herman Blake worked with students from the University of California, Santa Cruz to conduct service projects on Daufuskie Island, South Carolina. There, he met author Pat Conroy, whose book 'The Water Is Wide' was set on a caricatured version of the island. Blake was frustrated by Conroy's ignorance of the local people. In contrast, Blake learned from island residents like Willie Miller and Thomas Stafford, who later appeared in a Smithsonian magazine article by author Alex Haley; and, when a Savannah reporter tried to consult Blake about the island, he coordinated interviews with residents to allow them to describe their lives on their own terms. Blake also conducted service projects with Thomas Barnwell's Hilton Head Fishing Cooperative, and served on the board of St. Helena Island's Penn Center with James Clyburn and Robert McGuire. Additionally, Blake met Barbara Williams-Skinner when she was a student, and later served as an editor of the National Black Law Students Association journal at her request.

Video Oral History Interview with J. Herman Blake, Section A2007_036_001_007, TRT: 0:28:10 ?

J. Herman Blake drew upon his community organizing experience while founding Oakes College at the University of California, Santa Cruz, where he taught until 1984. The college's administrators worked to recruit women and

people of color to the faculty, while Blake and Professor Roberto Crespi advised the students. One advisee, Martin Martin, who initially struggled with math, went on to graduate from Harvard Medical School, and taught at David Geffen School of Medicine in Los Angeles. Blake later called on Martin to give advice to other students of color. During this time, Blake often wrote at his friend's, Alex Haley's home in Tennessee. They also collaborated on the Kinte Library Project, which was funded by the Carnegie Corporation. However, Haley became disillusioned after struggling to manage the scholars he recruited for the project. Blake was on the set of Haley's 'Roots' miniseries in 1987, and assisted Haley with his Smithsonian magazine article about Daufuskie Island, South Carolina.

Video Oral History Interview with J. Herman Blake, Section A2007_036_001_008, TRT: 0:23:03 ?

J. Herman Blake served as president of Tougaloo College in Tougaloo, Mississippi for one year. He wanted to improve its academic profile, and to change the college community's perception of itself as mediocre. However, he struggled with the school's small budget, and with staff who did not share his vision. After terminating the college's development director, Blake secured funding from the IBM to purchase microscopes for the biology department. Blake also increased student retention, and designed a required course that emphasized writing skills and intellectual engagement. While the class elicited support from students, it faced resistance from the faculty. Blake was forced to dismiss several faculty members and administrators, one of whom embezzled money, and another who mishandled an incident of sexual assault. Blake also conflicted with an alumni couple after recommending their son attend a more academically challenging institution than Tougaloo College.