

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with James Shoffner

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## Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Shoffner, James Priest
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with James Shoffner,
Dates:	April 18, 2012
Bulk Dates:	2012
Physical Description:	8 uncompressed MOV digital video files (3:41:44).
Abstract:	Organic chemist James Shoffner (1928 - ) worked as a research chemist at Universal Oil Products and has dedicated over forty years of service to the American Chemical Society including serving on the national board of directors. Shoffner was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on April 18, 2012, in Chicago, Illinois. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2012_116
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Organic chemist James Shoffner was born on January 14, 1928 and raised on a rural plantation in New Madrid, Missouri. Shoffner's segregated school was open only five months a year; the rest of the time was reserved for growing cotton. He transferred to a boarding school in Kansas City, Missouri where he was first introduced to chemistry and biology. However, Shoffner still had to help in the cotton fields and school for him did not begin until late November. He attended Lincoln University for a year before joining the United States Army, where he earned tuition benefits through the G.I. Bill. After completing his military service, Shoffner returned to college and received his B.S. degree in chemistry from Lincoln University in 1951.

Following graduation, Shoffner worked at the United States Post Office before returning to school and earning his M.S. degree in organic chemistry from DePaul University. Schoffner worked at a local paint company before being hired as a carbohydrate researcher at Corn Products International. After six years, Shoffner returned to graduate school to pursue his doctoral degree in organic chemistry at the University of Illinois, Chicago. After receiving his Ph.D. degree in 1965, Shoffner joined Universal Oil Products Company (UOP) where he would spend the next thirty-six years working in petroleum chemistry, specifically studying NMR spectroscopy and additives for plastics. Shoffner started a second career with the American Chemical Society (ACS) becoming active in the Division of Petroleum Chemistry. He held a series of positions in ACS' Chicago Section including serving as a board member and co-chair of Project SEED, a program to help disadvantaged students pursue a career in chemistry. He became a councilor of the ACS in 1974. In 1993, Shoffner retired from Universal Oil Products and joined Columbia College in Chicago as a science professor and science education consultant. In 2006, Shoffner organized the American Chemical Society conference honoring the famed chemist, Percy L. Julian. He was also instrumental in the development and served as a consultant for the 2007 PBS NOVA program, *Forgotten Genius* , about the life of Percy L. Julian.

James Shoffner has been active with the American Chemical Society for over forty years and received his thirty-

year councilor plaque in 2005. Shoffner was awarded the ACS Award for Encouraging Disadvantaged Students into Careers in the Chemical Sciences and the Henry Hill Award. Shoffner lives in Elk Grove, Illinois.

James P. Shoffner was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on April 18, 2012.

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## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with James Shoffner was conducted by Larry Crowe on April 18, 2012, in Chicago, Illinois, and was recorded on 8 uncompressed MOV digital video files. Organic chemist James Shoffner (1928 - ) worked as a research chemist at Universal Oil Products and has dedicated over forty years of service to the American Chemical Society including serving on the national board of directors.

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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:

- Shoffner, James Priest
- Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)
- Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

### Subjects:

- African Americans--Interviews
  - Shoffner, James Priest--Interviews
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# Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

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The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

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Universal Oil Products Company

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# Occupations:

Organic Chemist

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# HistoryMakers® Category:

ScienceMakers

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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 James Shoffner, April 18, 2012. 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 James Shoffner, Section A2012\_116\_001\_001, TRT: 1:29:02 ?

James Shoffner talks about his family background. His mother, Virginia Thomas, was born in the late nineteenth century in Marvel, Arkansas. She grew up and worked on a farm during her childhood before moving North. His father, Andrew Anderson Shoffner, was also born in the late nineteenth century in Obion, Tennessee. After working in the steel mills of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania for a while, he moved to Tiptonville, Tennessee, where he met his wife. Shoffner was born in 1928 in Tiptonville.

African American families--Southern States.

Farm life--Arkansas.

Iron and steel workers--Pennsylvania--Pittsburgh.

Video Oral History Interview with James Shoffner, Section A2012\_116\_001\_002, TRT: 2:31:16 ?

James Shoffner's father, Andrew Anderson Shoffner, was a minister and an avid reader, which he deliberately instilled in his children. Shoffner was born on a cotton plantation in Tiptonville, Tennessee in 1928. His earliest childhood memories are of his picking cotton and being involved in church at Mount Olive Missionary Baptist Church in New Madrid, Missouri. His family moved to New Madrid, Missouri when he was two years old. The city is known for its major seismic activity due to its location to a fault line. Shoffner talks about his childhood and his experience at O'Bannon Elementary School.

African American ministers.

Childhood and youth--Missouri.

Cotton picking.

New Madrid Seismic Zone.

Video Oral History Interview with James Shoffner, Section A2012\_116\_001\_003, TRT: 3:30:48 ?

James Shoffner grew up in New Madrid, Missouri, where he attended O'Bannon Elementary School. He was a good student and enjoyed all of his teachers and subjects. Shoffner then attended O'Bannon High School up through grade ten and, after receiving a scholarship from his church, completed his last two years at Western Baptist Seminary High School in Kansas City, Missouri. He was introduced to chemistry after taking a semester course that taught chemical formulas; there was no lab course for chemistry. Shoffner graduated from high school in 1945 and went on to attend Lincoln University in Jefferson City, Missouri, where he majored in chemistry.

Religious education--Missouri.

Chemistry--Study and teaching--Missouri.

Lincoln University (Jefferson City, Mo.).

Video Oral History Interview with James Shoffner, Section A2012\_116\_001\_004, TRT: 4:31:06 ?

James Shoffner graduated from Western Baptist Seminary High School in 1945 with very little science preparation. Despite that, he entered Lincoln University with aspirations of becoming a doctor and found a mentor in Dr. Monty Taylor. Shoffner's studies were interrupted in 1946 when he decided to serve in the United States Army. After serving for almost two years, he returned to Lincoln University on a GI Bill and completed his B.S. degree in chemistry in 1951. Shoffner moved to Chicago, Illinois and worked at a Post Office while he took graduate courses at the Illinois Institute of Technology and continued to pursue medical school. However, after receiving a rejection, Shoffner decided to abandon his medical school aspirations and continue his graduate studies in chemistry. Shoffner entered DePaul University in 1953 and earned his M.S. degree in 1955. He then began working at Corn Products Refining Company in

Argo, Illinois.

Lincoln University (Jefferson City, Mo.)--Alumni and alumnae.

Physicians--Vocational guidance.

Mentoring in education.

African American veterans--Education--Government policy.

Chemistry--Study and teaching (Graduate)--United States.

Video Oral History Interview with James Shoffner, Section A2012\_116\_001\_005, TRT: 5:30:09 ?

James Shoffner received his M.S. degree in organic chemistry from DePaul University in 1955. Shoffner then worked at Johnsteen Paint and Varnish Company for ten weeks before he joined Corn Products Refining Company in Argo, Illinois. He talks about his work at Corn Products, as well as the uses and health concerns for corn by-products. In 1961, Shoffner left Corn Products and began studying organic chemistry at the University of Illinois Medical Center in Chicago, Illinois. His dissertation research focused on the structure and synthesis of pyridinium compounds. After completing his Ph.D. degree in 1963, Shoffner joined Universal Oil Products Company. Shoffner then talks about meeting Percy Julian.

Corn Products Refining Company.

Corn--By-products.

Chemistry, Organic--Research.

Pyridinium compounds.

Julian, Percy Lavon, 1899-1975.

Video Oral History Interview with James Shoffner, Section A2012\_116\_001\_006, TRT: 6:29:36 ?

James Shoffner talks about Percy Julian, who is an African American research chemist who made significant contributions to science and medicine. Julian is credited for being a pioneer in the industrial large-scale chemical synthesis of human hormones and medical drugs, such as cortisone. After completing his doctoral studies at the University of Illinois at Chicago, Shoffner joined Universal Oil Products. Concurrently, Shoffner became involved with the American Chemical Society. He also served as one of the first chairs of Project SEED, a program to help disadvantaged students pursue careers in science. In 1973, Shoffner became a Councilor for the American Chemical Society. He talks about his professional activities and his patents.

Julian, Percy Lavon, 1899-1975.

African American chemists.

American Chemical Society.

Project SEED.

Chemistry--Patents.

Video Oral History Interview with James Shoffner, Section A2012\_116\_001\_007, TRT: 7:29:02 ?

James Shoffner talks about his organizational affiliations and reflects on his career at Universal Oil Products. He considers his work on the chemical synthesis of rubber to be the most significant aspect of his career. He also talks about his hopes and concerns for the African American community, science policy and education in the United States, and his experience teaching at Columbia College in Chicago, Illinois.

Universal Oil Products Company.

Rubber chemistry.

Science--Study and teaching--Government policy--United States.

Columbia College (Chicago, Ill.)--Faculty.

Video Oral History Interview with James Shoffner, Section A2012\_116\_001\_008, TRT: 8:10:45 ?

James Shoffner talks about the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development and his family. He also reflects upon his legacy and how he would like to be remembered.

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.

African American families.