

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Don West

---

## Overview of the Collection

<b>Repository:</b>	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
<b>Creator:</b>	West, Don, 1937-
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Don West,
<b>Dates:</b>	October 22, 2016
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2016
<b>Physical Description:</b>	6 uncompressed MOV digital video files (3:15:01).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Photographer Don West (1937- ) documented Boston's African American community for over thirty years. West was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on October 22, 2016, in Boston, Massachusetts. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2016_078
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

---

## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Photographer Don West was born November 15, 1937 in Boston, Massachusetts, to Elise and Claude West. West attended Brookline High School, graduating in 1955, before going on to study math at Morgan State University in Baltimore, Maryland. In the 1960s, West studied with Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, and was a professional bass guitarist. He taught transcendental meditation in Detroit, Michigan throughout the 1970s.

In the early 1980s, West became a staff photographer for the *Bay State Banner* in Boston, Massachusetts, documenting the movements, struggles, and successes of Boston's African American community. During this period, West worked as a press photographer for United Press International. In 1983, West was the official photographer for Melvin King's "Rainbow Coalition" mayoral campaign. Also in the 1980s, West regularly documented performers, including B. B. King, Whitney Houston, and Diana Ross, at Boston's Concerts on the Common. In 1990, West served as official photographer for Nelson Mandela during the South African anti-apartheid leader's visit to Boston on June 23, 1990. The Museum of African American History on Beacon Hill exhibited his work in the exhibit *Portraits of Purpose*, which was well-received and featured prominent social leaders of Boston's African American community. West photographed Governor Deval Patrick's inauguration in 2007; and in 2009, was a Resident Artist in the African American Master Artists-in-Residence Program at Northeastern University in Boston. In 2012, West founded Blackwire News Service, a wire service for people of color worldwide. The Urban League commissioned an updated version of *Portraits of Purpose* in 2012. Then, in 2014, West co-authored *Portraits of Purpose: A Tribute to Leadership* with Kenneth J. Cooper.

West is the founder and owner of Don West Photography. His editorial and documentary work has taken him all over the world, including to Spain, China, Paris, Jerusalem, and the Caribbean. Prominent subjects photographed by West have included Alice Walker, Angela Davis, J. Keith Motley, and President Barack Obama during his 2012 campaign trail in the Northeast. West is a member of numerous organizations, including: National Press Photographers, Boston Press Photographers and National Association of Black Journalists. He has received multiple awards for his contributions in photojournalism, particularly for the City of Boston.

Don West was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on October 19, 2016.

---

## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Don West was conducted by Larry Crowe on October 22, 2016, in Boston, Massachusetts, and was recorded on 6 uncompressed MOV digital video files. Photographer Don West (1937- ) documented Boston's African American community for over thirty years.

---

## 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:

West, Don, 1937-

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

### Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

West, Don, 1937- --Interviews

---

## Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

---

## The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

---

### Occupations:

Photographer

---

### HistoryMakers® Category:

ArtMakers

---

## 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 Don West, October 22, 2016. 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 Don West, Section A2016\_078\_001\_001, TRT: 1:28:43 ?

Don West was born on November 15, 1937 in Boston, Massachusetts to Elise Thurston West and Claude West. His father was born in 1893 in Danville, Virginia. After the death of West's paternal grandfather, businessman Charles West, the family moved to Cambridge, Massachusetts. West's father went on to become a Pullman porter, and then joined the U.S. Post Office Department in Boston. Several of West's paternal uncles worked in law, transportation and photography, and most of them married white women. West's mother was born

in Richmond, Virginia in the early 1900s. Her father, Robert Thurston, worked as a waiter on ships that traveled between Maine and Nova Scotia, Canada. At this point in the interview, West talks about his mother's racial identity and his relatives' experiences of racial passing. West was his parents' only child, and grew up in the predominantly white Boston suburb of Brookline, Massachusetts. There, he began his education at the Edward Devotion School.

Video Oral History Interview with Don West, Section A2016\_078\_001\_002, TRT: 2:30:26 ?

Don West began his education at the Edward Devotion School in Brookline, Massachusetts. He was an introverted child, and preferred to spend time with his parents, Elise Thurston West and Claude West. They spent the summers in Mashpee, Massachusetts, a segregated vacation destination on Cape Cod, which was home to the Wampanoag Native American tribe. West learned carpentry and brick masonry from his father, who was a graduate of the Hampton Institute in Hampton, Virginia. He also built a small radio station at his family's home, which he used to entertain his mother. His parents were well known in Boston's African American society, and once hosted Boston Braves player Sam Jethroe, who was barred from the white hotels around Braves Field. In addition to spending time with his parents, West befriended the projectionist at the Coolidge Corner Theatre in Brookline. He went on to attend Brookline High School, where his artistic talent was overlooked by his teachers.

Video Oral History Interview with Don West, Section A2016\_078\_001\_003, TRT: 3:30:14 ?

Don West had no African American friends in Brookline, Massachusetts, where his family attended a white Methodist church. Upon graduating from Brookline High School in 1955, he enrolled at the historically black Morgan College in Baltimore, Maryland, where he experienced social acceptance among his peers for the first time. As a result of his social life, West received low grades, and was eventually forced to leave the university. Through his father's connections, he obtained a position at the U.S. Post Office Department in Boston, Massachusetts. Around this time, he became involved in the folk music scene of the early 1960s, and cofounded the Folklore Center guitar shop in Cambridge, Massachusetts. West played guitar for the Mandrell Singers, with whom he performed in Cambridge and on 'The Phyllis Diller Show.' He remembers his friendship with the blues musician Taj Mahal, and talks about emulating the guitar technique of Reverend Gary Davis.

Video Oral History Interview with Don West, Section A2016\_078\_001\_004, TRT: 4:29:38 ?

Don West joined the transcendental meditation (TM) movement in 1967. After recognizing the need for African American TM teachers, West spent two months learning from Maharishi Mahesh Yogi in the mountains of Estes Park, Colorado. He then taught TM in Cambridge, Massachusetts for a few years, before moving to Detroit, Michigan. There, West taught TM to Shirley McNeil, a school administrator whose family was well connected in Detroit. She introduced West to celebrities like Smokey Robinson's wife and The Four Tops, and helped him start the 'Take 20' TM segment on Detroit's WJZZ Radio. After eight years in Detroit, West moved to the San Francisco Bay Area, where he taught TM at the San Quentin State Prison. He also began working as a counselor for sickle cell patients. West returned to the Boston area when his paternal aunt, Lillian West, fell ill. In addition to his work at Boston City Hospital's sickle cell program, West became a freelance photographer for the Bay State Banner and United Press International.

Video Oral History Interview with Don West, Section A2016\_078\_001\_005, TRT: 5:29:11 ?

Don West began his career as a professional photographer in the late 1970s. He initially worked freelance in Boston, Massachusetts, where he sold his pictures

to the United Press International and the Bay State Banner. At this point in the interview, West talks about the development of his photography skills, as well as the transition from film to digital technology. He also talks about the differences between amateur and professional photography. In Boston, West documented historic events like Nelson Mandela's visit in 1990, and Governor Deval L. Patrick's inauguration in 2007. His images of the black community were featured in the Portraits of Purpose exhibit at Boston's Museum of African American History in 1997. Fourteen years later, the exhibit was remounted at the National Urban League convention in Boston. As a result, West's photography was compiled into a book called 'Portraits of Purpose: A Tribute to Leadership,' which was coauthored by journalist Kenneth J. Cooper and published in 2014.

Video Oral History Interview with Don West, Section A2016\_078\_001\_006, TRT: 6:46:49 ?

Don West used a Kodak Tri-X film camera at the start of his career as a professional photographer. Following the introduction of digital photography, he shot primarily with a Nikon camera. At this point, West describes his artistic process and his philosophy of photography. He also talks about his admiration for Brazilian photographer Sebastiao Salgado, who documented the Rwandan genocide. At the time of the interview, West was a member of the African American Master Artists in Residence Program at Northeastern University in Boston, Massachusetts. He shares his plans for the future, and talks about the history of photography in the African American community. West had two daughters, Elyssa West and Erica West; and a grandson, Royce West. He reflects upon his legacy and how he would like to be remembered, and concludes the interview by narrating his photographs.