



Smithsonian Institution Archives

Black Aviators Videohistory Collection, 1989-1990

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Collection Overview

Repository:	Smithsonian Institution Archives, Washington, D.C., osiaref@si.edu
Title:	Black Aviators Videohistory Collection
Identifier:	Record Unit 9545
Date:	1989-1990
Extent:	4 videotapes (Reference copies). 9 digital .wmv files and .rm files (Reference copies).
Creator::	
Language:	English

Administrative Information

Preferred Citation

Smithsonian Institution Archives, Record Unit 9545, Black Aviators Videohistory Collection

Historical Note

Black American men and women struggled throughout the 1930s to gain the opportunity and right to fly airplanes. Organization within African American communities, support by white individuals, and aeronautic feats by blacks working with limited resources all served to challenge the racism and sexism of American society. Despite institutionalized biases and the persisting effects of the Great Depression, the number of licensed black pilots increased about tenfold, to 102, between 1930 and 1941. This development helped move the federal government, though not the private sector, into sanctioning black men to operate the twentieth century technology of powered flight during World War II.

C. Alfred "Chief" Anderson was born in 1906 and had his first airplane ride in 1928. In 1933, he became the first African American to earn a transport, or commercial, pilot's license, and with Dr. Albert E. Forsythe completed a series of long-distance flights in 1933 and 1934 to promote black aviation. In 1940, Anderson instructed students from Howard University for the Civilian Pilots Training Program (CPTP) until he was recruited by Tuskegee Institute in Alabama to act as its chief primary flight instructor. In 1946, he organized Tuskegee Aviation, Inc., to service aircraft until he was forced out of business by the state's attorney general in the late 1950s. He has continued to fly and co-founded Negro Airmen International in 1970 to encourage others to enter the field of aviation.

Janet Harmon Bragg was a registered nurse inspired to fly by the exploits of Bessie Coleman, the first licensed black pilot in the United States. She earned her pilot's license in 1932 at the Aeronautical University, Inc., in Chicago, Illinois, and because she was one of the few black pilots still employed during the Depression, Bragg paid for most of the airplanes used by the Challenger Air Pilots Association during the 1930s. During World War II she was rebuffed by both the Women's Airforce Service Pilots and a license examiner in Alabama from contributing to the war effort as a pilot; the government also refused her

services as a nurse. After the war, Bragg married and ran two nursing homes until she retired in Tucson, Arizona.

Lewis A. Jackson was born in 1912 and started flying in 1930. He gained his transport license in 1935; his barnstorming paid for the B.S. he received from Marion College in Indiana in 1939. Jackson joined Cornelius Coffey in Chicago as flight instructor before leaving for Tuskegee where he became director of training for their CPT Program. In 1948, he earned his M.A. in education from Miami University in Oxford, Ohio, and his Ph.D. from Ohio State University in Columbus in 1950. Jackson served in various teaching and administrative positions, including the presidency, at Central State University. He left in 1972 for an administrative post at Sinclair Community College in Dayton, Ohio. He has maintained an interest in flying, examining applicants for pilot licenses, and designing and building airplanes that could also be used on roads.

Cornelius Coffey was born in 1903 and had his first airplane ride in 1919. He graduated from an automotive engineering school in 1925 and an aviation mechanics school in Chicago, Illinois, in 1931. He co-organized the Challenger Air Pilots Association with John Robinson to promote flying among blacks in the Chicago area, built an airport in Robbins, Illinois, and opened an aeronautics school. In 1937 he earned his transport license and opened the Coffey School of Aeronautics. In 1939 the African-American communities in Chicago and Washington, D.C., successfully lobbied to have Coffey's school included in the CPT Program; Coffey trained black pilots and flight instructors throughout World War II. After the war, Coffey joined the Chicago Board of Education and established an aircraft mechanics training and licensing program in the city's high schools. Coffey retired in 1969 and has since acted as a licensed mechanic examiner and aircraft inspector.

Harold Hurd first saw a black man fly an airplane at an airshow in 1929. Three years later, he was one of the first class of all black graduates from Aeronautical University in Chicago. After graduation Hurd helped organize the Challenger Air Pilots Association and its 1937 successor organization, the National Airmen's Association of America, in efforts to expand black interest in flying. He underwrote his aviation interests by working at the Chicago Defender newspaper. He later worked for several local papers on Chicago's Southside.

Introduction

The Smithsonian Videohistory Program, funded by the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation from 1986 until 1992, used video in historical research. Additional collections have been added since the grant project ended. Videohistory uses the video camera as a historical research tool to record moving visual information. Video works best in historical research when recording people at work in environments, explaining artifacts, demonstrating process, or in group discussion. The experimental program recorded projects that reflected the Institution's concern with the conduct of contemporary science and technology.

Smithsonian historians participated in the program to document visual aspects of their on-going historical research. Projects covered topics in the physical and biological sciences as well as in technological design and manufacture. To capture site, process, and interaction most effectively, projects were taped in offices, factories, quarries, laboratories, observatories, and museums. Resulting footage was duplicated, transcribed, and deposited in the Smithsonian Institution Archives for scholarship, education, and exhibition. The collection is open to qualified researchers.

Descriptive Entry

Ted Robinson, an employee of the Federal Aviation Administration, held a two-year appointment at the Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum as a historian of black aviation. During that time he recorded two video sessions with five black aviators of the 1930s. The interviewees related how they became interested in flying, how they obtained airplanes and training, how they publicized their aviation skills at the local and national levels, and how they contended with the prejudices opposing them. Robinson was especially concerned with visually capturing the survivors of that era since there are few pictorial records of their past.

In Session One, recorded in Washington, D.C., in November 1989, Robinson interviews C. Alfred "Chief" Anderson, Janet Harmon Bragg, and Lewis Jackson on their social and technical experiences in aviation in the upper Midwest and at the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama. They discussed their struggles to become accredited pilots and open the United States Army Air Corps to black fliers.

Session Two was recorded in Chicago, Illinois, in March 1990, where Robinson interviewed Cornelius Coffey and Harold Hurd on their similar efforts in the Chicago metropolitan area and specifically on Coffey's organization of a licensed flight and mechanic's school before and during World War II. During both interviews Robinson used period photographs to stimulate and complement the recollections of the participants.

This collection consists of two interview sessions, totalling approximately 7:00 hours of recordings and 201 pages of transcript.

Names and Subject Terms

This collection is indexed in the online catalog of the Smithsonian Institution under the following terms:

Subjects:

- Aeronautics
- African American air pilots
- African Americans -- History
- Interviews
- Military history
- Oral history
- Science -- History
- Technology -- History
- Women -- History
- World War, 1939-1945

Types of Materials:

- Transcripts
- Videotapes

Names:

- Anderson, Charles Alfred, 1907-1996
- Bragg, Janet Harmon, 1907-1993
- Coffey, Cornelius
- Hurd, Harold
- Jackson, Lewis A.

Robinson, Theodore W., 1926-2001, interviewer

Container Listing

Interviews

Interviews

Session 1: November 28, 1989

Interviews

At the Director's Conference Room, National Air and Space Museum, Washington, D.C., featured Anderson, Bragg, and Jackson on the various approaches taken to become licensed pilots, c. 1930-1945, including: Bragg's early experiences and challenges in becoming a pilot; Anderson's training to become first licensed black commercial pilot; Jackson's training for pilot license; origins of National Airmen's Association (NAA); black involvement in Civilian Pilots Training Program (CPTP); CPTP at Howard University (Washington, D.C.) and Tuskegee Institute; Tuskegee Institute's initial refusal to begin aviation program for blacks; operation of CPTP at Tuskegee; post-war careers of interviewees. Visual documentation included: group interaction; photographs of people and activities discussed; explanation of photographs shown during the session, with close-ups.

Interviews

Transcript, 1-100 pages, of videotape recording, 3 hours, 25 minutes.

Interviews

Recording of Interview: Total Recording Time: 3 hours, 25 minutes

Note:

- Original Masters: 10 Beta videotapes
- Preservation Masters: 10 Motion jpeg 2000 and 10 mpeg digital files
- Dubbing Masters: 4 U-matic videotapes
- Reference Copies: 2 VHS videotapes, 4 Windows Media Video and 4 Real Media digital files

Interviews

Session 2: March 14, 1990

Interviews

At the Carnegie-Woodson Regional Library, Chicago, Illinois, featured Coffey and Hurd on efforts to become licensed pilots and organize a flying school, c. 1927-1945, including: Coffey's background in automobile mechanics and experiences in airplane mechanics and engineering; conditions at Curtiss-Wright School of Aeronautics; Challenger Air Pilots Association; building Harlem Airport (Robbins, Illinois); lobbying Tuskegee Institute (Alabama) for aviation program; founding Military Order of the Guard (MOG); National Airmen's Association of America; African-American admittance to Civilian Pilot Training Program; Coffey School of Aeronautics; racial and gender integration of Coffey's school; Coffey's post-war career. Visual documentation included: photographs of people and activities discussed; MOG membership card.

Interviews

Transcript, 1-101 pages, of videotape recording, 4 hours.

Interviews

Recording of Interview: Total Recording Time: 4 hours

Note:

- Original Masters: 11 U-matic videotapes
- Preservation Masters: 11 Motion jpeg 2000 and 11 mpeg digital files
- Dubbing Masters: 5 U-matic videotapes
- Reference Copies: 2 VHS videotapes, 5 Windows Media Video and 5 Real Media digital files