

Biographical Description for The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Elaine Ellis

PERSON

Ellis, Elaine, 1917-2013

Alternative Names: Elaine Ellis;

Life Dates: November 30, 1917-December 21, 2013

Place of Birth: Panama, Panama

Residence: New York, NY

Occupations: Dancer

Biographical Note

Dancer Elaine Ellis (also known as Calamity Jane) was born November 30, 1917 in Panama. She moved to New York with her mother, Flossie Freeman McNeil, and father, Clifford McNeil, at the age of seven. As a young girl, Ellis learned to dance. She was instructed by friends who attended the Henry LeTang School of Dance. After graduating from Jamaica High School, Ellis taught touch typing and eventually became a traveling instructor. Interested in going into business for herself, Ellis owned and operated a dry cleaner and later a cosmetics counter in a local department store. Disenchanted with business ownership, Ellis answered an open call at the Cotton Club for Spanish girls, and although she only knew four Spanish words, was the last chorus girl hired in 1939.

When the Cotton Club closed in 1940, Ellis continued to perform at Café Zanzibar, Club Mimo, the Lenox Lounge, in Atlantic City and at the Apollo Theater. At the Apollo Theater, Ellis performed with Bill “Bojangles” Robinson, Duke Ellington, Don Redman, and Andy Kirk. A married mother of two, Ellis eventually quit dancing to begin a lucrative twenty-five year bartending career. Ellis tended bars all over Harlem and gained quite a following, winning awards for the most congenial and best bar maid.

In 1986, Ellis was invited by Geraldine Rhodes-Kennedy to join the Silver Belles. Ellis was honored to join a group of former chorus girls including Bertye Lou Wood, Fay Ray, Cleo Hayes, and Marian Coles. The Silver Belles performed at senior centers and regularly, at the Cotton Club. In 1986, the Silver Belles were featured in a documentary about their lives, "Been Rich All My Life" directed and produced by Heather Lyn MacDonald.

Ellis passed away on December 21, 2013, at the age of 96.

Elaine Ellis was interviewed by The HistoryMakers on October 25, 2007.

Related Entries

Ps 57 Crescent School [STUDENTOF]

[from ? to ?]

Jamaica High School [STUDENTOF]

[from ? to ?]

Max Sued School [EMPLOYEEOF]

[from ? to ?]

Touch Typing Instructor

[EMPLOYEEOF]

[from ? to ?]

Owner

Café Zanzibar [EMPLOYEEOF]

[from ? to ?]

Peformer

Club Mimo [EMPLOYEEOF]

[from ? to ?]

Performer

Lenox Lounge [EMPLOYEEOF]

[from ? to ?]

Performer

Apollo Theater [EMPLOYEEOF]

[from ? to ?]

Performer

[EMPLOYEEOF]

[from ? to ?]

Bartender

Cotton Club [EMPLOYEEOF]

[from 1939 to 1940]

Chorus Girl

Silver Belles [EMPLOYEEOF]

[from 1986 to ?]

Dancer

