

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Elaine Ellis

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Ellis, Elaine, 1917-2013
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Elaine Ellis,
Dates:	October 25, 2007
Bulk Dates:	2007
Physical Description:	2 Betacame SP videocassettes (0:49:46).
Abstract:	Dancer Elaine Ellis (1917 - 2013) was a member of the Silver Belles, a senior dance group of the former Harlem Chorus Girls. Ellis performed with Bill "Bojangles" Robinson, Duke Ellington, Don Redmond, and Andy Kirk during her career. Ellis was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on October 25, 2007, in New York, New York. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2007_304
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

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.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Elaine Ellis was conducted by Adrienne Jones on October 25, 2007, in New York, New York, and was recorded on 2 Betacame SP videocassettes. Dancer Elaine Ellis (1917 - 2013) was a member of the Silver Belles, a senior dance group of the former Harlem Chorus Girls. Ellis performed with Bill "Bojangles" Robinson, Duke Ellington, Don Redmond, and Andy Kirk during her career.

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:

Ellis, Elaine, 1917-2013

Jones, Adrienne (Interviewer)

Burghelea, Neculai (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Ellis, Elaine, 1917-2013 --Interviews

African American entertainers

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Silver Belles (Dance group)

Occupations:

Dancer

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 Elaine Ellis, October 25, 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 Elaine Ellis, Section A2007_304_001_001, TRT: 0:29:24 ?

Elaine Ellis was born on November 30, 1917 in Panama to Flossie Freeman McNeil and Clifford McNeil. Her mother was kidnapped as a child by a family friend, who raised her in Costa Rica. Ellis' mother loved to dance, and competed in ballroom dancing contests with singer Carmen McRae's father, Oscar McRae.

Ellis' father was born in Jamaica, and was raised by his father in Panama. There, Ellis enjoyed going to carnivals as a child. At seven years old, she moved with her family to New York City, where she attended P.S. 57 and Jamaica High School. She also learned to tap dance from her friends, who learned from dancer Henry LeTang. Later, Ellis worked as a typing instructor, owned a dry cleaners and operated a cosmetics counter; and eventually became a dancer at the Cotton Club, Lenox Lounge and Apollo Theater. She also performed at the Paradise Club and Club Harlem in Atlantic City, New Jersey. After quitting dancing to care for her husband and son, Ellis became the first female bartender at the Renny Bar.

African American families--New York (State)--New York.

African Americans--Education--New York (State)--New York.

Cotton Club.

African American dancers--New York (State)--New York.

Harlem (New York, N.Y.).

Video Oral History Interview with Elaine Ellis, Section A2007_304_001_002, TRT: 0:20:22 ?

Elaine Ellis was unofficially named the most efficient and most pleasant bartender in New York City, and was highly sought after for her exceptional service. Ellis describes the nightlife at venues in New York City like the Club Harlem during her twenty-five year career in bartending. When manager Geraldine Rhodes Kennedy founded the Silver Belles, a tap dancing troupe comprised of mature dancers Bertye Lou Wood, Fay Ray, Marion Coles and Cleo Hayes, she insisted that Ellis join the group. They performed with vocal group Sister Sledge on the boardwalk in Atlantic City, New Jersey, as well as at charity events and senior centers. In 2006, Ellis was featured in 'Been Rich All My Life,' filmmaker Heather Lyn MacDonald's documentary about the Silver Belles. She took a hiatus from the group after suffering two strokes. Ellis concludes the interview by narrating her photographs.

African American dancers--New York (State)--New York.

Cotton Club.

Bartending--New York (State)--New York.

Silver Belles (Dance group).