

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Gertrude Hadley Jeannette

---

## 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>	Jeannette, Gertrude, 1914-2018
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Gertrude Hadley Jeannette,
<b>Dates:</b>	June 9, 2005
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2005
<b>Physical Description:</b>	6 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:49:52).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Actress, stage director, and playwright Gertrude Hadley Jeannette (1914 - 2018 ) founded the H.A.D.L.E.Y. Players theater company in Harlem, York City. Jeannette was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on June 9, 2005, in New York, New York. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2005_133
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

---

## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Playwright, producer, director, and actress of the stage and screen, Gertrude Hadley Jeannette, was born in Urbana, Arkansas, on November 28, 1914, to Willis Lawrence Hadley and Salley Gertrude Crawford Hadley. Jeannette was raised in Arkansas where she attended Dunbar High School in Little Rock. Just before her high school graduation, Jeannette decided that she wanted to get married instead of attending Fisk University, as she had previously planned; she and Joe Jeannette, II, a prizefighter and the president of the Harlem Dusters, a motorcycle club, eloped to New York City in 1934.

In New York City, Jeannette learned to drive; in 1935 she became the first woman to get a license to drive a motorcycle. In 1942, because of the shortage of male taxicab drivers caused by the war, Jeannette became one of the first women to drive a cab in New York City. During this time, Jeannette decided to further her education; she took bookkeeping classes in the basement of Abyssinian Baptist Church, and speech classes at the American Negro Theatre in order to remedy her speech impediments. In 1945, Jeannette was cast in the lead role in *Our Town*; in 1950, she performed in her first play, *This Way Foreward*. That same year, Jeannette and Fred O'Neil appeared on television in James Weldon Johnson's *Gods Trombone* on CBS's General Electric Hour; she had replaced Pearl Bailey, who was originally cast in that role. As a result, Jeannette continued to work both in the theatre and in film and television; she went on to play roles in Broadway plays such as *Lost In The Stars*, *Amen Corner*, and *The Great White Hope*. Some of Jeannette's film credits included *Shaft*, *Black Girl*, and *Cotton Comes To Harlem*.

In 1979, Jeannette founded the H.A.D.L.E.Y. Players (Harlem Artists Development League Especially for You) in the Harlem neighborhood of New York City. The mission of the H.A.D.L.E.Y. Players was to give artists a chance to develop their talents and skills in the theatre, and to enrich the cultural life in Harlem. Jeannette went on to direct, produce, and write her own plays, as well as the works of other playwrights.

Jeannette was presented with several awards for her work and accomplishments. In 1991, Jeannette was honored as a living legend at the National Black Theatre Festival in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, and in 1998, she was

honored with the Lionel Hampton Legacy Award. Jeannette was inducted into the Arkansas Black Hall of Fame in 1999, and in 2002, she received the prestigious Paul Robeson Award from the Actor's Equity Association. Jeanette, though retired, remained an active and celebrated member of the New York theater scene well into her nineties.

Jeannette passed away on April 4, 2018 at age 103.

---

## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Gertrude Hadley Jeannette was conducted by Larry Crowe on June 9, 2005, in New York, New York, and was recorded on 6 Betacame SP videocassettes. Actress, stage director, and playwright Gertrude Hadley Jeannette (1914 - 2018 ) founded the H.A.D.L.E.Y. Players theater company in Harlem, York City.

---

## 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:

Jeannette, Gertrude, 1914-2018

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Burghelea, Neculai (Videographer)

### Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Jeannette, Gertrude, 1914-2018--Interviews

---

African American actresses--Interviews

---

Women dramatists, American--Interviews

---

African American theatrical producers and directors--Interviews

---

## Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

---

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

---

## Occupations:

Actress

---

Stage Director

---

Playwright

---

## 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 Gertrude Hadley Jeannette, June 9, 2005. 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 Gertrude Hadley Jeannette, Section A2005\_133\_001\_001, TRT: 0:29:04 ?

Gertrude Hadley Jeannette was born on November 28, 1914 in Urbana, Arkansas to Salley Crawford Hadley and Willis Hadley. Jeannette's maternal grandmother, Caroline Crawford, was born in Madagascar and lived on a Cherokee reservation where Jeannette's grandfather, Frank Crawford, was a supervisor. Jeannette's paternal grandfather was a Watusi from South Africa who saved the life of an American on safari. Out of gratitude, the man he saved educated and gave him land in Arkansas. Jeannette's mother was born around 1895 in Eufaula, Oklahoma, where she attended a mission school. Jeanette's father was born in 1865 in Urbana, and graduated from Philander Smith College. Jeanette's parents met when her father taught at her mother's school. They married in 1909. Willis Hadley increased his family's land to 365 acres, and farmed until leasing the property to Standard Oil; they moved to Little Rock for its superior schools. Jeannette recalls life on the farm and her childhood medical condition, tongue tie.

African American actresses--Interviews.

Women dramatists, American--Interviews.

African American theatrical producers and directors--Interviews.

Video Oral History Interview with Gertrude Hadley Jeannette, Section A2005\_133\_001\_002, TRT: 0:29:27 ?

Gertrude Hadley Jeannette attended Paul Laurence Dunbar High School in Little Rock. At her senior prom in 1933, she heard Cab Calloway play and met prizefighter Joe Jeanette, II. He immediately asked her to marry him. Although Jeannette refused at first, she agreed to elope after a disagreement with her father, Willis Hadley. Jeannette and her husband settled in New York City and eventually reconciled with her parents. Jeanette's husband, a member of the Harlem Dusters, taught her to ride a motorcycle, and she became the first woman licensed to do so in the State of New York. Jeanette also was the city's first female taxi driver in 1942. She enrolled in a Works Progress Administration school. There, she met Fred O'Neal, who convinced her to begin acting classes at the American Negro Theater (ANT). Jeanette was trained by Osceola Archer and was cast in an ANT show right after graduating the program. She recalls training with HistoryMaker Ruby Dee, Alice and Alvin Childress, Clarice Taylor and Sidney Poitier.

Video Oral History Interview with Gertrude Hadley Jeannette, Section A2005\_133\_001\_003, TRT: 0:29:39 ?

Gertrude Hadley Jeannette apprenticed for Osceola Archer, who directed summer stock theater in New York and Massachusetts. During her apprenticeship, Jeannette was a dresser for Ethel Barrymore. Jeannette wrote the play 'This Way Forward.' It was produced by the American Negro Theater

(ANT) in 1950 and featured Isabel Sanford in her first stage role. At ANT, she worked with Alice Childress, Evelio Grillo, Sr., and HistoryMakers Ruby Dee, Ossie Davis, and Harry Belafonte. After the ANT closed in 1950, Jeannette founded the Elks Community Theatre, where she often asked her friend, the Jamaican-born actor Frank Silvera, to direct. Silvera encouraged Jeannette to audition for the musical 'Lost in the Stars,' directed by Rouben Mamoulian and based on the novel 'Cry, the Beloved Country.' She appeared in both the Broadway and touring productions from 1949 to 1952. Jeannette met Juanita Hall, who was also on tour with 'South Pacific.' She also remembers meeting Leigh Whipper, Hattie McDaniel and Butterfly McQueen.

Video Oral History Interview with Gertrude Hadley Jeannette, Section A2005\_133\_001\_004, TRT: 0:29:48 ?

Gertrude Hadley Jeannette supported Paul Robeson when he was accused of being a Communist during the Second Red Scare. She was at the Peekskill riots in 1949, when a mob attacked Robeson's concert, and her husband, Joe Jeannette, II, helped to protect him. Jeannette recalls testifying before Congress, along with HistoryMakers Ruby Dee and Ossie Davis, during the McCarthy era. Jeannette returned to Broadway in 1963, appearing opposite Robert Preston in 'Nobody Loves an Albatross.' She played Sister Odessa in James Baldwin's play 'The Amen Corner' in California. Jeannette recounts how the play moved to Broadway in 1965 with the financial backing of Nat King Cole. Jeannette acted in a 1975 revival of 'The Skin of Our Teeth' and made her final Broadway appearance in 'Vieux Carre.' Her other credits include 'The Little Foxes' with Geraldine Page and several touring productions of 'A Raisin in the Sun.' Jeannette founded the H.A.D.L.E.Y. Players in Harlem in 1979. She describes her philosophy of acting.

Video Oral History Interview with Gertrude Hadley Jeannette, Section A2005\_133\_001\_005, TRT: 0:25:57 ?

Gertrude Hadley Jeannette's father, Willis Hadley, was a Garveyite. As a child, she was embarrassed when he would make speeches praising African civilization to her friends; as an adult, she found herself advocating for his ideals. Jeannette met Jack Johnson through her father-in-law, a former boxer, when she moved to New York City. Jeannette recalls how Johnson teased her and her husband about the age difference in their marriage. Her husband, Joe Jeannette, II, retired from boxing and began training prizefighters, including James J. Braddock, whose career was dramatized in the film 'Cinderella Man.' In 1979, Jeannette founded the H.A.D.L.E.Y. Players in Harlem, New York. The company staged award-winning plays like 'HOME' by Samm-Art Williams and 'The Old Settler' by John Henry Redwood. Jeannette describes her hopes and concerns for African American theater and for the larger African American community. She reflects upon her life, legacy and family, and describes how she would like to be remembered.

Video Oral History Interview with Gertrude Hadley Jeannette, Section A2005\_133\_001\_006, TRT: 0:25:57 ?

Gertrude Hadley Jeannette narrates her photographs.