

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Fay Ray

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Ray, Fay
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Fay Ray,
Dates:	October 18, 2007
Bulk Dates:	2007
Physical Description:	5 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:04:43).
Abstract:	Dancer Fay Ray (1919 - 2013) was a member of the Silver Belles, a senior dance group of former Harlem chorus girls. Ray performed as a chorus girl at several New York City theaters, including the Apollo Theatre and performed with the bands of Duke Ellington and Louis Armstrong. She also danced in the first black USO show. Ray was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on October 18, 2007, in New York, New York. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2007_297
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Fay Ray was born in 1919 in Louisiana. Life for Ray was not easy. At the age of eleven, Ray decided to leave a hard life of picking cotton. Dressed as a boy, she rode the train to Shreveport. There, she joined a Vaudeville circuit and traveled the nation. On the circuit, Ray learned to tap dance from some of the best dancers of her day. At the age of sixteen, Ray left the vaudeville circuit to sing and dance solo.

In 1943, Ray moved to New York where she found steady work as a chorus line dancer. Ray performed at Café Zanzibar, Club Ebony, 845, the Cotton Club and the Apollo Theater. Ray's chorus line performed with premiere bands like Duke Ellington, Cab Calloway, Louis Armstrong and Jimmy Lunceford who wrote *Just for Dancers* for Ray's chorus line.

During World War II, Ray stopped dancing for a time, moved to Providence, Rhode Island and became a certified welder at Walch Kaiser, welding ship seams for the navy. Ray danced in the first black USO show and traveled to Europe, the Middle East and the Far East. When she turned fifty years old, Ray retired from dancing, spent two years welding on the Alaskan Pipe Line and drove a New York taxi-cab.

In 1985, Ray joined a senior dance group with other former Harlem chorus girls, the Silver Belles. Managed by Geraldine Rhodes-Kennedy, the group began rehearsing at the Cotton Club, made their debut performance at the Latin Casino and have been performing ever since. The Silver Belles have appeared in Atlantic City and on Dan Rather's *48 Hours*. In 2006, the Silver Belles were featured in a documentary, *Been Rich All My Life*, about their lives, produced by filmmaker Heather Lynn MacDonald.

Ray passed away on September 14, 2013

Fay Ray was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on October 18, 2007.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Fay Ray was conducted by Adrienne Jones on October 18, 2007, in New York, New York, and was recorded on 5 Betacame SP videocassettes. Dancer Fay Ray (1919 - 2013) was a member of the Silver Belles, a senior dance group of former Harlem chorus girls. Ray performed as a chorus girl at several New York City theaters, including the Apollo Theatre and performed with the bands of Duke Ellington and Louis Armstrong. She also danced in the first black USO show.

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:

Ray, Fay

Jones, Adrienne (Interviewer)

Burghelea, Neculai (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Ray, Fay--Interviews

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 Fay Ray, October 18, 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 Fay Ray, Section A2007_297_001_001, TRT: 0:29:53 ?

Fay Ray was born on October 11, 1919 in Natchitoches, Louisiana to Minnie Perot, whose family was from Houma, Louisiana. Ray's father, a Syrian man named David, owned a commissary store in Natchitoches. Due to her parents'

tumultuous marriage, Ray often stayed with her neighbors. She attended a public elementary school in Natchitoches, where she excelled in math. She was also influenced by her geography teacher, Ada George Dawson, who first sparked Ray's interest in travel. Ray ran away home at twelve years old, and lived for a time with an elderly woman, who fed her fried chicken and cake and encouraged her to sing and dance. After the woman died, Ray was taken in by the woman's daughter, whose husband abused her. She escaped to a brothel in Alexandria, Louisiana, where she cleaned the outhouses in exchange for lodging. While there, she was inspired by the films of Shirley Temple and Bill "Bojangles" Robinson, and taught herself to dance and play the piano.

Video Oral History Interview with Fay Ray, Section A2007_297_001_002, TRT: 0:29:24 ?

Fay Ray was taken into the care of a nineteen year-old prostitute after running away to Alexandria, Louisiana; but, when the woman was arrested, Ray was taken into custody and abused by the police. She hitchhiked to Winnfield, Louisiana, where she lived with a hotel owner named Mildred, who treated Ray as a daughter. After Mildred's husband became abusive, Ray escaped to Shreveport, Louisiana, where she worked as an errand runner at a brothel, until joining a touring vaudeville act. Ray eventually settled in Detroit, Michigan, where she worked at the B. Siegel Company department store, and ran errands for hospital patients. She also worked as a singer and dancer at a nightclub in Hamtramck, Michigan, where she joined a community of deaf mute performers. Ray later moved to Chicago, Illinois, where she lived next door to singer Billie Holiday, and befriended tap dancer Leonard Reed and musicians Louis Armstrong, Ella Fitzgerald and Pearl Bailey.

Video Oral History Interview with Fay Ray, Section A2007_297_001_003, TRT: 0:29:35 ?

Fay Ray moved to New York City, where she performed as a chorus girl in three Broadway shows. She also worked in nightclubs like Café Zanzibar and Bill Miller's Riviera; and danced at the Cotton Club in Harlem, where musicians like Duke Ellington and Louis Armstrong performed for all-white audiences. When she was unable to find work as a dancer, Ray drove a taxicab to earn a living. During World War II, she moved to Providence, Long Island, where she learned to weld. She worked as a welder in the shipyards of Providence, building vessels for the U.S. Navy; and at a local hardware store. Ray later returned to New York City, where she took courses in stenography and typing, and obtained a secretarial position at boxer Joe Louis' Triangle Records company. Following World War II, Ray travelled abroad to France and Sweden, where she sang and danced in shows. Ray also remembers her friends, singer Pearl Bailey and boxer Joe Louis; her apartment in New York City; and her travels in Brussels, Belgium.

Video Oral History Interview with Fay Ray, Section A2007_297_001_004, TRT: 0:29:12 ?

Fay Ray joined the comedy duo of Bert Howell and Buddy Bower on a tour of the United States, where she performed solo as a tap dancer. Upon her return to New York City, Ray reconnected with former chorus dancer Cleo Hayes. In the late 1980s, Hayes recruited Ray to join the Silver Belles dance troupe, which was established by another former chorus girl, Geraldine Rhodes Kennedy; and included former dancers Marion Coles and Elaine Ellis. The Silver Belles performed at venues like LaGuardia Community College and the Cotton Club, which had reopened in the 1970s. The original members were later joined by dancers Karen Callaway Williams and Mercedes Ellington, the granddaughter of musician Duke Ellington. The Silver Belles opened at the Apollo Theater in Harlem, and were the subjects of Heather Lyn MacDonald's documentary 'Been Rich All My Life,' which was released in 2006. Ray talks about mentoring

young performers, and concludes this part of the interview by describing how she would like to be remembered.

Video Oral History Interview with Fay Ray, Section A2007_297_001_005, TRT: 0:06:39 ?

Fay Ray dances with the interviewer, Adrienne Jones.