



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

---

## 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>	Elaine Ellis
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Elaine Ellis,
<b>Dates:</b>	October 25, 2007
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2007
<b>Physical Description:</b>	2 Betacam SP videocassettes (0:49:46).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Dancer Elaine Ellis (1917 - ) is 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.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2007_304
<b>Language:</b>	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, Florence Freeman, 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 Lee Tang School of Dance. After graduating from Jamaica High School, Ellis taught touch typing for the Max Sued School and eventually became a traveling instructor for the company. 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 Redmond, 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.

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 Betacam SP videocassettes. Dancer Elaine Ellis (1917 - ) is 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

Jones, Adrienne (Interviewer)

Burghelea, Neculai (Videographer)

### Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Ellis, Elaine--Interviews

---

African American entertainers

---

## Organizations:

HistoryMakers (Video oral history collection)

---

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

---

Silver Belles (Dance group)

---

## 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 8/15/2011 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, October 25, 2007

Video Oral History Interview with Elaine Ellis, Section A2007\_304\_001\_001, TRT: 0:29:24  
2007/10/25

Elaine Ellis discusses growing up in Panama and moving to New York. She also discusses going to PS #57 School where everyone was mostly black and Spanish. Ellis details her career after high school graduation. She was an employee for a school that offered touch typing classes and traveled to businesses to teach the touch-typing technique. Ellis went on to own a dry

cleaning business. Ellis never took dance classes at school, instead she learned from other dancers. Ellis talks about becoming one of the chorus girls and being taught the routines by some of the other girls at the Cotton Club. Some of the bands she danced for included Andy Kirk and Don Redman as well as the Apollo Theater. She had to leave dancing to become a bartender when she got married.

African American families--New York

African American education--New York

Cotton Club

African American dancers--New York

Harlem (New York, N.Y.)--History

Video Oral History Interview with Elaine Ellis, Section A2007\_304\_001\_002, TRT: 0:20:22  
2007/10/25

Elaine Ellis details her twenty-five year bartending career and awards given, including a plaque for being most proficient in bartending. Ellis discusses her dancing career. She talks about the former chorus girls group, the Silver Belles, which was the only black female group to ever work the New Jersey Boardwalk, at the time. The group became well known and performed at senior citizen homes. Ellis also talks about the fun times she had while working at the Cotton Club. Ellis explains the difference between bartending then and now, when she was a bartender it was easy to make money versus now because the drinks are so expensive. Elaine discussed the Silver Belles' documentary, "Been Rich All My Life." Ellis discusses the health issues that caused her to take a break from the Silver Belles. Ellis shares and describes personal photographs.

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

Cotton Club

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

Silver Belles (Dance group)