

Interview with Jessie Mae Finley

Interview #: SAA-A-D-2003-003

Interview # 04: December 13, 2003

Interviewer: Naarah Patton

Patton: This is Naarah Patton, interviewing Mrs. Jessie Mae Finley on
December 13, 2003.

Finley: Nice to have you today, my lady. I wanted to talk about my music. I don't think I ever told you the whole story. But you see, I claimed nearly all the musicians in Springfield. That's the reason I wanted to tell you more about the music. I told you a lot of things, but I didn't tell you that I always that I claim all of you. You know, the reason I claim them is because I'm 97 years old and I have worked with nearly all of them since I've been in Springfield, either in the churches, in the community or on any programs. I've worked with them and so I claim them, every one of them. I'm about the only one my age out still promoting music, music education and the spirituals, saving the spirituals. The music and musicians and music education. So I'm still doing that, and there's not very many people that's 97 that is doing that, so I claim them all. I was thinking about some other things I did so far as the music was concerned. I used to help people with their speech, youngsters and older people, and I taught them how much power there was in music. To tell you about one little story. This little boy could not talk, he wouldn't talk. So I said let me have him

and let's see if he will, maybe I can sing to him. So I'd sing to him. He hadn't talked, said a word, not one word, and they were getting concerned. So I sang to him, I said daddy, daddy, daddy. I just started singing daddy, daddy, so he could see his power. I had another girl that I worked with who stuttered a lot. Her name was Roberta Jones and she stuttered quite a lot, even up to—she was ready to leave and go to Chicago, to a voice teacher. I encouraged her to continue her voice and you know, it was a surprise that with her continuing her voice studies and everything like that, she almost solved that problem and did not stutter hardly at all, and she was a member of the Chicago Orchestra. What is it now? Anyhow, it was the big orchestra they had in Chicago. She would travel with them abroad and sang with them. She had such a beautiful voice, and that was the power you know. So there is a lot of power in music and I try to tell everybody this. So anyhow, I think the people are beginning to believe it. (laughs) I had another young man that worked with me. He worked with me ten years, entertaining senior citizens at the state fair. Every year we would go down there and every day, plan for their music. He played the piano for me. His music was just really beautiful and he could arrange so many different things. He could play anything under the sun but had difficulty with his speech, and I worked with him, with his speech and also in his singing and just in speaking. I would just stop him right now and say here, say this or that, a grown man. He could

play anything he wanted on the piano but he was having trouble with his speech. So he's passed away but when he passed away he was speaking pretty well. So I was really, really proud of him. His improvisations in his music was something we never heard before. Not very many people could do what he did with that music. So he knew there was power in music and stayed with it you know. So then I had another—well, I always tell a lot of people that there would be less family troubles and less divorce and everything if the housewives would decide to sing a little more. You know, sing. If she's singing herself, that the power of music would help. There were so many things I had in my speeches that it would help if you had more music in your life. I think I can remember saying something about that some of the other musicians I had not talked about. We had one musician here, Kenneth Barton. Kenneth Barton was about the best piano player. They called him the music man, and he was my best piano player, especially for the clubs and things like that you know. He also worked with the church, but he could play anything under the sun, and he played at one of the clubs here, one of the main clubs here. He played regularly there and they called him the music man. Kenneth Barton could play anything. He had a friend of his, Ted Smith, that had a very, very beautiful tenor voice, and he and Ted Smith usually performed at different places. They did a lot of things at the nursing homes and like that. That was their business. Now Kenneth, that was

not the only thing he did. He worked for the state of Illinois and was an auditor, and he worked for the Internal Revenue. He was one of the auditors, he was very good, a smart guy, but he's the music man of Springfield, Kenneth Barton was. I wanted to tell you about another person. I think I told you about Dorothy Simpson Winston, who taught music for several years, and also Mary Waters taught for several years. If you wanted to get more information on them, I would try to get it for you. They were teachers and they all worked with me in my church, and I worked with all of them. Really, I'm not trying to floor you. I just, the good Lord kept me busy doing different things. I think that it's covered, gets my music pretty well. Let's see now. Well anyhow, I wanted to talk also about some of the people that I have not talked about at all. The first two Afro American women to work for the state of Illinois. They wouldn't take us except for the washroom. The first one was Jessie Rawlins and the other one was Alice Taborn. They were the first two. Now they had some men that they had hired as messengers, and that's the only thing they could get, is messenger or janitor work. I have a friend here by the name of Vesta Nichols. I hope somebody is taking her life and doing something with it. She was among the early workers in the state government. She came along about the time that I came in, in 1941. She was a very, very smart girl and she comes from a very, very smart family. Her father's name was Albert Meek, M-E-E-K. He was one

of the very first messengers they had with the state of Illinois. Her mother worked for the state of Illinois and she quit and went back and worked again. That was way back then. She was working I think, in her eighties before she retired. That's just the kind of family it was. So the whole family was smart. I'll tell you, just about the one person, Vesta's children is a doctor here in Springfield. She is—what's her first name? [Victoria] It will come to me in two minutes. Anyhow, she's, what's the children's doctor?

Patton: Pediatrician.

Finley: Pediatrician, I think that's what she is, with SIU [Southern Illinois University] Medical School. I thought she was an oncologist.

Patton: Does she deliver babies?

Finley: Yes, mm hmm.

Patton: That would be an OB/Gyn.

Finley: Well anyhow, she's a very outstanding doctor and it's just an outstanding family. I wish they would interview her, but Vesta's not very well, so she wouldn't even accept any interviews. So anyhow, the whole family was very, very smart. So I wanted to mention the Meek family. So anyhow, that takes care of them. Now I wanted to talk about maybe some of the other doctors here. Let's see now. I

gave you everything about Dr. Kenniebrew and all that information, that's my first husband. Another smart girl here. You have one of these books I think.

Patton: Yes.

Finley: Well I wanted you to take your book and get information on Naomi Ross. She's been such a help to me in my chorus, Love, Joy and Peace, and everything that I do she helps me. She's a nurse and she works for the state. There is some information on her, get that information from the book. To write about her, that would be one of the women of excellence. Her husband is the most outstanding cancer doctor in town. What do you call cancer doctors?

Patton: Oncologist.

Finley: Yes. He's done so many breast cancers that they call him the breast man. So Dr. Ross is one of the outstanding doctors, Dr. Donald Ross. Going back to the other doctors that I did not mention, I don't think. Way back then, some time ago, there was Dr. Ware. You can take his name down, Dr. Ware.

Patton: How do you spell that?

Finley: W-A-R-E.

Patton: And then there was Dr. Ford, and then there was the podiatrist, Dr. Ervin, he was a Ford, podiatrist. Then there was just a regular medical doctor by the name of doctor—did I give you Dr. Ford?

Patton: Yes.

Finley: Okay. There was Dr. Beverly and Dr. English. Those were some of the main doctors that were here in Springfield, and they all worked together. I was in their presence quite a lot. We have a doctor here now, a podiatrist, Dr. Wilson, and we have several of them. Oh, I'll think of it in a few minutes, it will come to me. Anyhow, I was saying—you were saying something about you wanted something on World War I and World War II. This would be occurring, something from World War I. Dr. Kenniebrew was also a member of the National Guard, and he trained men mainly for service, helped the service. He was deferred. There's something about him being deferred here. I'm just trying to see what it was in here. Do you see anyplace there where it says something about him being deferred from going into the service and him training doctors and nurses for service?

Patton: It says he opened an army training school that prepared young surgeons for emergency medical care on the battlefield.

Finley: There we are.

Patton: But it doesn't mention deferment there I don't think.

Finley: Well I mean, he did not have to go. He trained them right here, at the National Guard. There were several people that had to go into the service but he didn't because of this. So you had. That doctor that I said was a gynecologist or whatever, her name was Victoria Johnson. Before Johnson it would be Meek. Victoria Meek Johnson. No it wasn't. Her name would be Nichols. Victoria Nichols Johnson. I think that's just about all the little things that I wanted to say. This is a history of Zion Baptist Church. It's the history that I did for the 125th anniversary, and for the 130th anniversary. It starts out with the beginning of a song. So I don't know how much of this you want to do. Are you going to do very much on the church, everything like that?

Patton: Yes.

Finley: You are? Well, this tells the whole history of the church. At that time I did it on the 130th anniversary, and I had intended to—it shows me here as the chairman, and two of the older members of the church are... This here is some more precious stuff. Do you want it?

Patton: I can make copies of that.

Finley: That's the whole story of the church.

Patton: Thank you.

Finley: You have a book on it, of the church, anyway 50 years I think it is, but this starts out at the beginning. It tells more of a story. Do you think you want to look at that?

Patton: Yes, thank you.

Finley: Well, those are things that are very precious. I feel like I can—you returned everything else and I know you are sincere enough, that you'll return it. Now let me see what else. Oh, now you wanted to know something about World War I. I think this during World War I time. This is a picture of my sister here, here I am, and that's Clyde, the Reverend Clyde Schultz. I believe I was about 13 there. It says Nellie, my sister, and Julia, Clyde, Jessie Mae. We lived in the country. We were fortunate to have a vehicle like this. Not very many people had those, what they call a surrey. We were somebody. So anyhow, I want to tell you something else before I go on with this. I have always had enough to buy automobiles. I guess I'm the only woman alive that's ever drove a Marmon Meteor.

Patton: What's that?

Finley: The Marmon car, it was a long time ago, back in 1925. Dr. Kenniebrew had the finest cars. He had the finest horses and everything that anybody would want. A lady told me that she used to go every morning, go to the window to watch him pass the house with

his high stepping horses. He was so proud of his horses you know, and they were really nice. He even had custom made gloves to wear, to protect his hands since he was a surgeon. He was very, very—I have to talk about somebody being a surgeon back then but he was one of the best. He did surgery on people from all over these little towns around here, far and near. The Mills brothers sometimes would send people back to him because they'd say, he can handle it. So how he could handle that was what he—knowing all the things we have now for surgeons, and knowing the little things that they had then, you just can't understand it. How could anybody get it done? Well he got it done. But anyhow, he liked cars and he liked horses. Now, I didn't get to see any of his horses but I did get to see his cars when I went to work for him. I could drive a car then because in our place, we were out in the country, and we had to cross a railroad track and sometimes crawl under the railroad tracks and sometimes crawl over them and sometimes it would move on us to get to high school. So my father mortgaged the pigs and got me a car. He got me an Oakland, I think was the first car I had. I had a brand new Oakland and at 13, 14, I was driving kids to high school. Isn't that something? So I always did like cars. I was one of the first in our community to have a car, and I'd drive the kids to school. Then when I went to work for Dr. Kenniebrew, he let me drive his Marmon. None, he wouldn't someone drive it, but he let me drive the Marmon. That car was a

very, very—it was a sports car, it's an exciting thing. I wonder why they stopped making them. Anyhow, I have a picture of me standing by his Marmon, and I enjoyed that. There's no way in the world anybody could say there's a person alive, woman alive anyhow, that ever drove a Marmon. Then after that, he also got one of the first rumble seat cars, like that. I went on to—I guess I was one of the first few people that had a Thunderbird. Isn't that something? Honey, I had to have a nice, new car. My second husband, he didn't like new cars. He liked used cars and he would take care of them and we didn't need a new car. When I got a Thunderbird, he found him a used car, and so he had signs on the cars, his and hers. Then I got another car, it was from Chevrolet and I can't think of the name of it. It looked very much like my Thunderbird. One of the last cars I had was the Town House. I managed to have me a nice car and yet I was still making enough money that I could eat properly and take care of the kids and college and do all the other things, but I just like new cars. There isn't anything I could say about the new cars, how Dr. Kenniebrew, how back in 1925, had this Marmon. Before that, they say they he had these high stepping horses. So I don't know if that means anything to you or not. I think I must have been about 13. I was, it was right at the close of the war. So I don't know, this is our life during World War I. I have a picture here of us kids scared to death. Oh, this is our

little church, the community, the family church. Everybody on there is related.

Patton: Wow.

Finley: And I was playing, right here. I think we had an organ or piano or something. So I'm there playing the organ. I was 13. Here we are, I was scared to death. The camera came through, and that's my brother, Reverend Clyde, and here I am, Jessie Finley, and there we have Rose Marie. We had a hard time getting ready, because those were the only dresses with the little... [unclear] (laughs) This here is a story here on how we left Western Avenue there and got to Springfield. I don't think you want to read that. That's a whole lot of stuff. I just wanted to show you. I told you about Rose Marie, there. I have to go back to the singers again. She was quite a singer. She studied voice and she also sang in Madame Butterfly, and opera in St. Louis. [unclear] So she was quite a voice, quite a singer. This other one is Julia, is Julia there? Yes, Julia is the baby there. This is another thing that goes back to the music. Julia was a beautician and had her own shop here, and even had a school. She schooled quite a few of the beauticians in town, finished at her school. Then she also did some work with children at the Feitshans High School. Of course we have a niece there and they wanted to do something special, so this was a group that they formed. It was called the George Washington Carver Choral

Ensemble. It was made up of some African American youngsters at Feitshans High School and Julia took them and trained them and I assisted her and guided her along, because I would come to listen and also helped her with it and all like that. They did some really, really heavy concerts. They sang a lot of classical music but also a lot of spiritual songs. I remember a couple of classical songs, the Hallelujah Chorus and the Rigoletto, and it was really great. They were community people who had a big concert at the Illinois College Conservatory, out there. Julia worked with them and I think there's just about only one of those people that's living now, and that's my niece in Seattle Washington. So she probably would remember all the things about George Washington Carver Choral Ensemble. Her daughter Crystal is also quite a singer. She's finished with Howard University, got her masters in her music voice and all, and she's been with us, [unclear]. I had her here for one concert one time. So the music goes on and on in the family, so I wanted to be sure to put that in there about Julia. Julia gave up her school here, gave up the children and went to California. She likes it there very much. She started a little shop there and she had her own school there, and she also taught at other schools and she was also on the state board of education. She just did a little of everything, a smart girl. So anyhow, we have some smart kids in our family. We all try to be somebody and do something. Now I don't know about World War I. I had one

brother there and his name was Roy, in World War I. Mother taught us all to play the little pump organ when we were youngsters, and he was in the war and just having a little information about the pump organ. When he came back he was playing all kinds of instruments, and so he decided to teach us, and he had every family to get an instrument for the kids and taught us. [unclear] So it was really nice, and that was really upsetting to us, but Lord have mercy we prayed and prayed. I never will forget that hallelujah day when he came home. That's about all I can tell you about World War I, because we were doing the Depression thing and how things were and how we had to help each other. Everybody helped each other. My mother believed in giving the first fruits of everything you had to somebody else, so we would wait for her, about the bread cause momma's going to give it to somebody else. Then we didn't have [unclear]. She believed in tithing and all like that. She worked very hard to get everybody to understand about her tithing. They were devout Christians, both my mother and my father. I remember you couldn't even drink coffee at our house. We couldn't have coffee. We couldn't have any kind of cards and games, things like that. The Bible didn't want you to. I started to croquet but other than that. We had a small church and they happened to have testimony needing things, and sometimes these people would testify that other people knew how they felt about it. So my mother said that she didn't know how in the world she would

testify. Sister Hastel had some—she would keep her coffee brewing on the stove all day long. When she knew there was no food value and it was—and Ted wanted to drink it. So sister Hastel, it got back to her. So my mother loved to read, and she would try to make us do nothing except for our studies and then the Bible, that's all. She didn't want anybody to know that she was reading any kind of—anything other than that. So sister Hastel says well, I'm not worried about my coffee, because sister Schultz read novels. She didn't even pronounce it novel. She said, she reads "novels." And mother didn't know that anybody knew that she was sitting there reading novels. She knew it was good for her and she would be trying to make other people [unclear] novel. So anyhow, she went home and she cried for weeks because they looked back on her and she was reading a novel. She was the most devout Christians you ever want to know. Let's see, I got off right there didn't I? About World War II, my brother was in the service. Anyhow, it had to do with the ships and things like that. What was those guys called?

Patton: The Navy?

Finley: No, not the Navy. Anyhow, he made a career out of—he was the honorary, given the medal for saving their ship at one time. They had to disband and get off the ship and everything like that, and he stayed on the ship and shut down all the things that could cause fire and

things like that. He shut down everything that had to be shut down, so he saved it from catching fire and burning up. He was a merchant seaman, that's what he was, a merchant seaman.

Patton: Which brother was this?

Finley: This is James, a merchant seaman. He shut down everything and it was very, very hard on him. I remember my father sent him a note saying you know, that his ship had been shot down or had been bombed or something. So my father started praying and he prayed morning, noon, and night and would scream and holler and everything. We said, you act like you're the only person in the world that was on that ship. He said that it was his last baby, his last boy. He couldn't stand it. We were all living together then because when my brother went for the merchant seamen and my sister's husband was going into the service, they said instead of trying to keep house in two places, so we all moved in to one house together. So we were living together. I had three nephews that were in the service. The interesting thing about it, at one time, all three of them, along with my brother, was stationed at the same place and they met over there. Can you imagine? That was quite an experience, to have that many of them meet and get to be with each other. So my brother had finally come home and he finally gave up the maritime service. He was a smart guy, he was really smart. [unclear] the service. The experience of them meeting

over there is really a highlight. Of course, he never could talk about the maritime service, the details. He just didn't want to. See, there were so many times you had to jump overboard, and then you'd have to jump over to see your buddies, check to see if they were living or they were dead. You'd try to save them and he just didn't like to talk about it. He's buried in a special place, an hour from Sacramento, California, that's where he lived. He's buried at a cemetery like Camp Butler. Let's see, what else would you want to know about me, can I tell you about. World War II, and the rations, the cars. They rationed out the sugar everywhere. We'd get the stock end of everything else. It was something we still had food. I feel sorry for anybody who has to go through another one of them, and that's why I don't tell you about it. I have a world of information. My daughter had [unclear]. Does that help you any?

Patton: Yes, thank you.

Finley: Well anyhow, if you need something else you can call me.

Patton: Okay.

Finley: You can ask me questions, but I would want that back.

Patton: Yes.

Finley: So you can go and get back to me at any time, call me and tell me.

Patton: Okay.

Finley: Let's see now, [unclear].

Patton: All right.

Finley: I don't know about the—now how, what are you going to do with this?

Patton: Do you want me to shut this off now? (break in audio)

Finley: I meant to tell you about the Webster plaques that were given out. The NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People] give it every year, this Dr. Webster, Dr. and Mrs. Webster, gave a plaque for the outstanding people in Springfield. It's for people who have done outstanding things in the community, Webster plaques. I had a listing at one time and I may still have it, I don't know, but it listed several members of my family got Webster plaques. The first one was my sister Julia. She got a Webster plaque for her work with the George Washington Carver Choral Ensemble. My son got a Webster plaque for outstanding work at Carthage College. He was the only Afro American student there and he lettered in nearly everything. He is now in the hall of fame at Carthage College, for what he did for Carthage College, it was interesting. It's interesting to know that one of his granddaughters, my great granddaughter, is at Carthage College. He was married again and that's with his first wife. He's married again and the second girl has been accepted to Carthage. So they're

all going back to Carthage. Getting back to the Webster plaques. My son and I was given a Webster plaque for my work in the community. And then my late husband was given the Webster plaque for his work in the community and his work with the Frontiers and what not, that's T.E. Finley. So that's five of us or four?

Patton: Four.

Finley: Well, that's some history. I have a list of everybody who had a Webster plaque. They weren't interested in it and I don't know what I did with it. I could find it if I had to, because they were... So, I think I need that in that, that Dr. and Mrs. Webster. It's almost as long as there is an NAACP and as long as that program goes on legally it's a wonderful award. That takes care of that. I had forgotten all that.

Patton: Thank you.

(End of Side One, Tape Four)

(end of interview)