

Interview with Jessie Mae Finley

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

Interview # 05: December 20, 2003

Interviewer: Naarah Patton

Patton: This is Naarah Patton, interviewing Mrs. Jessie Mae Finley, on December 20, 2003.

Finley: I wanted to be sure that I told you that I trained most of the musicians in town, mainly because I had worked with all of them during the years that I've been here. I've been 73 years, right here in Springfield. I've had some activities and programs and everything for them, and I've had a chance to teach them and direct them, and I just wanted you to know that I claim them, because I'm about the oldest person, 97, out there still promoting musicians and music education. I'll be sure that gets in there. (laughs) Now, did I tell you anything about the professional people here in Springfield, some doctors?

Patton: A little bit, yes.

Finley: I don't know if I gave names of any of them. Did I give names on them?

Patton: Some of them, yes.

Finley: Well, I wanted to be sure that I had them. Dr. Winston was a podiatrist. The early podiatrist was Dr. Ervin Ford. I'm sure I gave you that. I just wanted to be sure. We have a new podiatrist in town

and her name is what now? I have her name here someplace. Her name is Dr. Wilson but she's a new person here in town. I wanted to be sure her name was included.

Patton: Okay.

Finley: I had her card here. I guess it slipped out. Well, I originally I will check my steps when I go out. I'll go out here and maybe I'll see it. Now the other thing that I wanted to tell you about, one of the main things, is we had a man here who bought quite a lot of property and built some homes for people. It was a subdivision and it's named for him and his wife, and I thought we should have that in there. His name is Albert Harris and his wife is Jessie Harris. They bought some property in the northwest corner of Springfield, in part of MacArthur Boulevard, near—well it's near, going toward the airport, and there's a whole west corner. I believe they bought several acres. He said that, told his friends, including us, that anybody who had \$500 to give a down payment on the house, he'd build a house for them. He didn't know anything about building a house but he was going to get it done. So there are several houses that were built in that area, and that's on North Patton Avenue, north MacArthur, and going on out to what is now one of the motels. They bought some of the property. My husband was an artist, but he could build houses too, and so my husband, Theo E. Finley, and his friend, George Conover, who was a

builder, helped build a number of houses out there. People brought that in, they took dates, and they had \$500 down. So that was on North Patton and North MacArthur, where those houses were built. Now our house was built around the same time, but it was not included in this subdivision, because he bought the property before it was made a subdivision. We had an acre, beginning with Oak Ridge and North Patton, it was on the hillside. I think I told you about Albert Harris. Now-he had it going, there was a long length of things that he did, but that was the biggest thing that he did. He also had other property in Springfield, and he was very active in that. It was interesting to know that my husband and George Conover did the building for him. He was just the supervisor, I guess. My husband bought this acre there before we were married and when he proposed to me, he started talking about building a home immediately. That was in 1946. And he said he never built a home, but he wanted to build one for us. He came from Chicago during the Depression and he was in the poster art business and everything. Well, there wasn't much work to do, so he came here to get a job with the state, and so he had a job with the state that he worked on, and then he built houses. It's the funniest thing. He was not supposed to be a builder at all, but he could build anything, no matter what it was, even some of our furniture and our lamps and everything else in our home. I'll tell you about that later. He had this acre there and he decided to call it Finley's Little Acre. I thought it

was because it wasn't quite an acre, but he said my daughter suggested that it should be Finley's little acre. Finley's little acre was well known. It was well known for all the good times we had there on that hillside. We had a lot of trees and other things, you know. There were fruit trees: there was a pear tree, an apple tree and crab apple trees, peach trees and plum trees. What else did we have on there? We had grape arbors, and there were these huge elm trees that was on the place, which was exciting, but a disease came along and knocked off most of them. But we still had plenty of trees and everything else to make a beautiful hillside; all of the fruit and grapes and everything else that we had. I used to go out and pick those things and can them. I had plenty of things in the freezer and we'd can them for future use, and we had on that hillside, many picnics. He built a barbeque pit much longer than this here. He could build anything, so he built this barbeque pit and he built us a shelter over it so we would have tables and things in case it rained. Not only did he do that on the hillside, he built a dollhouse for my grandchildren, you know it was Judie's dollhouse. She enjoyed that so much you know, because it was beautiful. I told you a little bit about the hillside. Now we had barbeques on that hillside, we had fish fries, we had just big picnics, we had ice cream socials. We had a little of everything. There was something going on all the time at Finley's little acre, and I was really busy entertaining people and they wanted to come. So that's about all

I want to tell for the outside. I'll get into the house now. Outside there was a great thing, and I'm sorry that I'm not there. I hated to leave the home, but my children said to me when my husband died, "You cannot take care of this place, mama. We'll have to find another place for you." So my children told me when to sit down and when to get up, and I landed in Lincoln Tower here downtown, and I was there for ten years. Then my doctor said I needed a little extra help and he said you have to find someplace where you can get some, so I went to Oak Terrace Apartments, and I was there for three years, that's where I was when I fell and broke this shoulder. I thought I was done for when I fell and broke this shoulder. I didn't know that a fall would upset you that much you know, I'll make it. I'm still nursing this shoulder, taking therapy and everything for it. Then I had to go to a nursing home and I landed here. Of course, I had two other places with therapy before that, then I landed here at the Villa East. I'm coming along pretty nicely for 97, I'm doing pretty good. Where was I?

Patton: You said you were going to talk about the inside of the house.

Finley: Inside. He had his plans drawn up and everything, and they built us a house, a four-bedroom house with a fireplace and everything. Then he took his plan to a lumber company. They said, you're not going to find enough lumber in any place to build a house like that. You're

going to have to make a choice. You can't do it. So he had to make a choice. If he was going to rent a house or take an old house and fix it up, or cut his plans down. He decided to cut his plans down, with a smaller house. This must have been something exciting, because the State Museum, do you know where that is downtown?

Patton: Yes.

Finley: They have a videotape that's been going on now for ten years, showing how he made a choice to cut the house down and build a smaller house for his family. If you ever go over there, it goes continuously. It's really exciting. It tells all about when he started that from dirt and George Conover helped him build the house. Not only is that at the museum, it is on the internet. If you get the names right they'll tell you the story of how you make a choice to do certain things, and this is done in a style that you could use it for studies in school. So that's exciting to know, that he built this house and made his choice and built the house, it shows the whole thing. I told you it was on the internet didn't I?

Patton: Yes.

Finley: Then my first husband, Dr. Kenniebrew, was on the internet, the whole story of his life. The first part of his life and any how, if you get a chance to you know, pull it out and listen. So he decided to live

in a smaller house, and so he did a three-bedroom house. Of course, I had two children; Alonzo, my son, and Charlotte, my daughter, and they were both in high school. So he gave them their own bedrooms and then there was a bedroom for my husband and myself. I was telling you that a friend of ours said you'll never find enough lumber to build that house. Well he found enough lumber to make a very beautiful house. He even took scrap pieces of hardwood and made beautiful hardwood floors, put them together, and we had beautiful hardwood floors all over the place. It was really pretty to see, because he had put them together himself and took care of them. When he started building the house, I had a brother by the name of James, I think I told you about. He was in the maritime service. He was home and he had a friend who was called Ervin Lee. Ervin Lee was a plasterer, he was a construction worker. So James and Ervin came out to see what Theo was doing, and they went back and said "you know what, Theo is going to just take Jessie out there and put her in this first house he ever built, this comfortable home." He told them, "I'll show you what kind of home I'm going to have for her." They said, "Well, if you build a house here, we're going to tell you what we're going to do. We'll do all the plastering for it, for all the whole house." And as he got going on the house, Ervin and my brother James said, "Looks like we're going to have to plaster that house." (laughs) So they had to plaster the house. Inside the house, when the lady came to

interview him for the museum, we took her step-by-step, and she recorded everything. I have that recording someplace, the recording that actually as I was showing her things that he had done. Every room was individually decorated. They had pretty scallops and things all around you know? He used his artistic ability to take care of the rooms. He asked the kids what colors they wanted and then he fixed it so that this really was the most beautiful they ever saw. It was a showplace and in the front room, he made a medallion in the center, and it was just beautiful. I have pictures and slides and things of it, but where they are right now I don't know, but I have them. We went to Chicago to visit his sister, and she was renting one of these old, big Chicago homes. So he told her he wanted something there in that house that she didn't need, and that was a dining room with a center thing, a very big thing. Anyhow, he said you don't need this here. You want these two rooms to be connected, so let me have this and I want to do something with it in my new home. He took it all apart and took it to Springfield, chopped up the... what do you call it? What are those other dining rooms that they have? Well anyhow...

Patton: Is it a chandelier?

Finley: No, this was not a chandelier. This was a place where you keep dishes and things like that, show your dishes and you had a place to serve people on the counter. Well anyhow, it was a large piece of thing and

he took it apart and took it home, and in his basement, he had what you call a recreation room. He called it the cave. Isn't that something? When you go down you see his sign up there, the cave. You go down in the recreation room and he built his bar out of that material that he brought from Chicago, that old Chicago home. The back bar, the whole back bar was the material that he used to build it. Everybody enjoyed coming to that bar. He was what you call an old wine maker, and he made his own wine. Sometimes you'd go down there in the basement, and they had a laundry room and you'd hear the wine gurgling and wonder what was happening. But he made some very good wine and everybody wanted to taste his wine. Now he was not what you call a drinker. He just liked a little wine. Of course, if they wanted another little drink they could have a drink but really, they wanted just to taste his wine. That bar was busy, just like the hillside was busy; people coming by to visit us. From that old house, he also did take the chandelier that they had. It was an old chandelier with a lot of dangly things on the side to focus on, and he took that chandelier and he positioned it—and that medallion he had in the front room, and there were two parts that were lost, and he could make anything, so he made the two parts, he fitted that chandelier and you would not know the difference between what he did and what was there. It was the most beautiful sight. I have pictures of all of that, and I'd sit down just watching him all the time. He loved to paint,

loved to do things like that, and that was really a showpiece. I told you the lady from the museum, she was so delighted with all those things, and I explained everything. My husband wasn't very well then, and I was trying to tell them everything, and so he got excited. He says, I'm going to get up and I'm going to do it myself. He got up and got out of the bed and he started walking with us, but I still had to do most of the information that she needed for that. We didn't get our fireplace but anyhow, we did have some of the other things. He built a lot of things; he made all of our lamps. I needed something to put my feet on while I was watching television, so he built a big, round coffee table and put leather around the side. He fixed the sides up so it had flowers on the side you know, where I could sit down and put my feet up on it and watch the television. He built both beds in my daughter's room. She had two beds in there and he built the beds. He also built a desk for her and in Alonzo's room, he built him a bed, with all the drawers and everything, so he could have everything he wanted. He liked to do that. I could just show him something in a book and he'd like it and before you knew it, he was down in his shop. He had a shop connected to the recreation room. He built a recreation room, then his garage, then his shop. He had a shop with all kinds of equipment to use. He got really big shop things that he used to do everything on; drilling and everything else. So he'd make things like that and he made things for other people. Silly me, I got a little

jealous when he'd do anything for anybody else, because I started anyhow to try and find something he could make for me. (laughs) So yes, I was glad that he could share his talent with other people. He also did some building for some other people in town here. Dr. Lee built his home, and he and his friend George Conover did a lot of the work on that, and they built his whole bar and everything and he was real impressed I think, it was really exciting. He's gone now but she talks about how they... So anyhow, he built so many different things, just so many different things at home. The rooms we were in were rather small. We didn't have any material to do any big rooms, he couldn't find it. He couldn't find the materials, but he made it beautiful and it was a showpiece place. We had him build a shelf for my daughter, he made it a showcase. When she married, Lord help us, when she married and we had a big reception for her. People all came, we had really good people, and they wanted to come to the reception but they also wanted to see the house. We showed the house to everybody that came in. That was the kind of work that he did and what he was up to doing. He loved to do it and he was good at it. I didn't want this to pass without me saying something about it. I have slides and I have pictures of the whole house and everything in it. So one of these days, I'm going to get some of them out if I'm able, and they want to check the slides. I could get them because I took pictures inside and pictures of the outside. When my son graduated—not

graduated, when he married, we had a reception for him and the cars were backed up from all the way around Patton Avenue, over to MacArthur. We had lovely music. I had a young man that had some things that he wired up the place outside and inside, so there was music going you know? It was really exciting. I think I told you enough to know that it was what you call a showplace, and I thank God for it because he had a chance to build the house. My brother and his friend had to plaster. (laughs) Everybody had a chance to enjoy it. We had so many people there. He was a member of the International Business Association of Springfield and we had entertained quite a few international businessmen. I know one fellow, we had—the dining room was set up so he had a long table and everything to take care of the folks. He had very many people. Otherwise, they were used as card tables. He just had not seen anything like this before, and he acted like he never had anything to eat before. I always had plenty to eat, and I would always top it off by having black eyed peas. Some people would like them, you know, then I would have red beans and rice, they would like that, and then we would have some of everything else. Then I would usually have what they call—oh what is it now, there was bananas, put all his stuff on it. We had bananas. Well anyhow, that dessert that I'd have, and then I'd let them make their own banana split and there would be everything. We had ice cream, and I'd cook a little of everything. I loved to cook. I wasn't supposed

to be a cooker though. I wasn't supposed to be a cook. My sister was an excellent cook and my daughter had turned out to be an excellent cook, and I just kind of let it alone. Of course I had some special things that people liked. So I did an awful lot of entertaining there in the house the whole time I was there, so you know how hard it was for me to leave it. We sold the house, sold it to a man who was in the construction business. I was so glad I did because he is keeping it up now, and he has done several things there. I think in the kitchen, we had an eating place. You'd think you were going downtown to some of these here places, what do you call that?

Patton: The counter?

Finley: He made all of his cabinets and things. There wasn't anything that he couldn't make. I would say I liked this and if wanted anything, he had it made for me. So anyhow, that's enough about my second husband. I prayed to God for a good husband when my first husband died and a good father for my children and I got one. So I wanted to be sure that you had some information on him. That was Theo E. Finley. I think that's about all sweetheart.

Patton: What was your wedding like when you married him?

Finley: Oh, we were married at a church. We didn't have a big wedding. I sort of proposed to him you know? He visited our church one time

and everybody was crowding around him and telling him how glad they were to have him. So the president of the senior choir walked up to him and said, "Mr. Finley, we would like for you to work with our choir." And you know what I said? "Oh no, he's working with mine." I never met him before, never saw him before. So anyhow, he decided to work with my choir. He told me he was tone deaf and he couldn't sing, and I said if you open your mouth, I'll see that you sing. I said, I haven't found a person yet I couldn't get to sing. So I found out I was wrong. (laughs) The people there laughed at me and laughed. He tried to do a solo part and he couldn't get it going, so I said—it was really funny but anyhow, he tried. So then he came to choir rehearsal and I said, I'm going to have to find something for him to do. We were going to have a big rummage sale and I asked him to make a sign for my rummage sale, and I gave him poster board and some other stuff we had. He did something like this and he took it out front, and I said, now I'm not going to have any mess out there, I'll be able to see what he did out there. Well he made a professional sign, because that was his business. He made a professional sign and so I said, Lord have mercy, this is the answer to my prayers. So my family started dating him. He said he had to marry the whole family. I had the two kids you know, and I was living out on the limb without a husband. He said he really had to marry the whole family to get me. They started having him out for dinner and so forth and so on, and one night

we were all going to a big affair at Springfield High School. They went off and left me in the house with him alone, so as he was going out the door I said to myself, I said, “my family’s been telling me, you’re going to let this man get away from you. You have to watch Jessie Mae, she’s going to lose him.” When I got to the door, before I let him go out the door and I said, “Kiss me.” And he kissed me and that was the beginning. I called that my proposal to him, and he started talking about building a house right away. So we had a nice little affair at the church. After church on Sunday morning, that morning, we were married and I was glad I waited for it. Then we had a big reception and everything. I think the reception was at my sister’s home. Yes, it was at her home. He was a man that didn’t believe in just wasting money. He probably had part of his first penny earned, you know. We did have a reception at my sister’s house, Julia, we had a reception there. At the reception, he got a little upset. He said, “I don’t see any need of all this.” He said, we spent enough money here on this reception, I could have bought you a brand new washing machine. I told him I said, well if you don’t want to stay at the reception, go out there in the garage and sit down until after it’s over with. (laughs) He kind of quieted down you know, because he didn’t believe in spending a lot of money for things that aren’t necessary. That’s the only problems that we had at all during our marriage. I had to handle my money separately and he handled his money separately,

because he just didn't believe in all the things I did, you know, it was not necessary and I guess it was part of the relationship. I fought him, because I did find that I did want to spend my money while I could and do all the things that I could, and he enjoyed them, he really did. But anyhow, he helped organize the bank here in Springfield, the one on Cook Street, across from the post office. He was a member of the board there and he did a lot of things. So anyhow, this fellow that has the house now, he was a construction worker, house building or something, and he had done so many things to the house since then. We had a large deck connected to the house, where you can go out and sit. He built all the furniture for the deck. How he could build all that stuff? I think of it now, how in the world could he build all of that, but he did. And then you stop and think he was in the sign painting and poster art business in Chicago, and there's a possibility that you can see some of the signs that he has done on the really high water towers in Chicago. The old water tower, you can see some of the signs that he did. He loved to do that. He loved to work hard and he enjoyed it, and it didn't seem to mind him at all. But Finley said he never wanted to fly in an airplane. I did a lot of traveling, and we'd have to travel by car if he was going anyplace. He didn't want to get in an airplane, wouldn't get in it with us, so we didn't even try. Anyhow, he had his ideas and I had my ideas. Sometimes we had our ups and downs but really our downs were not so bad, most of it was just good. I would

say God blessed us. We lived together 40 years. He found it necessary, now he put something new on the front of the church, it's out in front of the house, a little porch light. He'd done my flowers, my hillside was covered with flowers. I told everybody when I went there, I said, I want anything you've got that I can plant, and so I had done that. My flowerbeds were beautiful. Mr. Finley had made our flowerbeds artistic like you know, and they were really beautiful. In fact, I have my snapshots of that and also, I did my share of slide shows, and I did slide shows at various churches and various organizations. I was busy doing all those things, that's what I liked to do. So anyhow, I think I told you—oh yes, we had a big—I had singing, we had Love, Joy and Peace. We had a concert and there was a lady there that I didn't know anything about. She came up and she introduced herself to me and she said, "Now I want you to know that I saved that chandelier." I said, "What chandelier?" She said, "The chandelier that your husband had in the front room." The fellow gave it to somebody and gave it away or something, and she said, "And I took it." She said, "I don't know how you let it get out of your hands." Lord I was trying, I was talking to everybody else and everything else. She gave me her name and everything and I said, I'll talk to you more. Call me, my name is in the book, I want to talk to you about that chandelier. I'll tell you how we got it and what he did to it. She said she would but she never did, and I've been very

worried about that. She said yes sir, I've got that. I don't want anything to happen to it. She said it was at an auction sale or something and she bought it. So, my things got a little scattered, here and there. I think I just about told you all I need to tell you, so you understand.

Patton: Okay.

Finley: I hope I got everything in, because if not I'll call you.

Patton: Okay.

Finley: You wanted me to sign something?

Patton: Yes.

Finley: I'll be happy to sign a release, but it would be absolutely necessary that it is going to be used for the purpose of the Afro American history in Springfield. Is that right?

Patton: It says, "We further understand that the Illinois State Historical Library, or its designee, may use this oral history for such educational or research purposes as they deem proper.

Finley: Sounds good. If there's anything else. This letter you sent to me, it explains there what you're doing it for and it also says here that I will have a copy of what the—will I get a copy?

Patton: I'll make sure you do.

Finley: I was going to tell you that some of this copyrighting, because my daughter wrote a book on our family and I took a lot of material from the family book. Now let me see here.

Patton: I'm just going to write down all the five dates that we—

Finley: All right. Now it says, hereby assign copyrights.

Patton: That's just of the actual—the words on the tapes.

Finley: We further understand that the Illinois State Historical Library, or its designee, may use this history for such educational and research purposes as deemed proper. That's fine. In making this, we make no claims for the factual accuracy of everything in the oral history, but instead assure users of our sincere effort to faithfully describe past experience. And so many people who take something like this and use it for their purpose, even if you do it. So we already have a book on it, it's copyrighted and so what do we have here today. What's the name, do they have a copyright?

Patton: Just of the tapes, not of any of the materials I made.

Finley: Well, now if they wanted to do anything else with it they would call me. Is that right?

Patton: I'll talk to Mrs. Dickerman about that but yes, I think so.

Finley: Yes. I would want them to check with me.

Patton: Okay.

Finley: I'm happy to know that—Lord have mercy. This seems like signing my life away. I can hardly write any more.

Patton: Thank you.

Finley: Did that help you?

Patton: Yes. We appreciate it, thank you.

Finley: You're going to mail me a copy of that?

Patton: Yes.

(End of Side One, Tape Five)

(end of interview)