

FHS Oral History Project – Reginald Finlayson

Description:

Reginald (Reggie) Finlayson was born on May 12, 1954, and grew up in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. His father's family history, however, has deep connections to Florida, particularly his grandfather, who built one of the oldest remaining Black churches in Miami—the Macedonia Missionary Baptist Church in Coconut Grove. Reggie recollected stories about his grandfather's time serving as the church's minister and its significance to the Black community in Coconut Grove. Additionally, Reggie recounted his father's experiences growing up in Jim Crow Orlando during the interwar and immediate post-World War II years. He also compared how Jim Crow materialized between the South and North, as his family resided mainly in the North, especially once Reggie was born in 1954. Reggie briefly mentioned the connections his family had with notable Black figures, including Martin Luther King, Jr., and Zora Neale Hurston. Lastly, he explained why he drove from Milwaukee to attend the Zora Neale Hurston Festival of the Arts and Humanities in Eatonville, Florida, and the festival's greater relevancy considering the current (~2020s) racial and political climate.

Transcription:

00;00;00 - 00;00;15

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: [This is Sebastian Garcia interviewing] Reggie Finlayson on February 2nd, 2025, at the Zora Neale Hurston Festival of the Arts and Humanities for the Florida Historical Society Oral History Project. Reggie, can you please tell me where you were born?

00;00;15 - 00;00;18

REGGIE FINLAYSON: I was born in Nashville, Tennessee.

00;00;18 - 00;00;24

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Did you grow up there? Did you spend most of your childhood in Nashville, or did you move around?

00;00;24 - 00;00;38

REGGIE FINLAYSON: Well, I grew up primarily in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. But, my mom and dad met in Nashville, and was there for a couple of few years after they married.

00;00;38 - 00;00;47

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Can you walk me through what was life like in Milwaukee growing up in, you know, the 60s, 70s?

00;00;47 - 00;01;50

REGGIE FINLAYSON: Well, my, dad was from Florida. And like a lot of people, he was looking for greater opportunity and getting out from under the Jim Crow restrictions, but Milwaukee also was segregated as well. Not in, quite the same ways, but, you know, it was not much different, but in many ways, you know, I enjoyed my childhood. It was a nice city. At that time, there were a lot of jobs. Milwaukee was, at that time was a manufacturing center and also a beer capital there where, like, number of beer companies, it was Schlitz that you don't

hear about much Pabst, Miller, Wine and Kugel. So there were a lot of jobs that African Americans had come north for.

00;01;50 - 00;02;06

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: You mentioned how your family was from Florida. Did your father ever, you know—perhaps when you were older or just hearing stories when you were a kid—did he ever describe some of the conditions living in the Jim Crow South, particularly in Florida?

00;02;06 - 00;03;42

REGGIE FINLAYSON: Well, I would see it. You know, we came down here quite a bit and there were, you know, clear lines where you were encouraged not to cross. There were restaurants where you couldn't, couldn't eat except to take it out the back. There were places you couldn't stay, as a child, even in Minnesota, we were traveling, and we couldn't stay in a hotel because of, of, segregation. And, of course, it affected where you could buy houses, and, how you where you could get loans for mortgages and, insurance. There were a whole host of ways that segregation was enforced, even even in the North. But, in terms of my, my dad's connection, he, was born here in Florida and grew up in Florida. So, matter of fact, he he grew up not far from here—in Orlando. And, he was very familiar with that. My my grandfather was a minister and had a very well established church finally on Coconut Grove in Miami. And his church, interestingly, was is Macedonia Baptist Church, which they also have one here. I noticed.

00;03;42 - 00;03;51

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Yep. And can you—so you said your father was born in Orlando?

00;03;51 - 00;04;27

REGGIE FINLAYSON: No, he was born in Manatee, Florida, but he grew up in Orlando. And then when he was, last year, a high school, which for him was when he was about 15 or so, they were they moved to the Miami area. But my grandfather was from Monticello, Florida, which is in the Panhandle. My grandmother was from Madison, Florida, and so we had roots in northern prior to Florida.

00;04;27 - 00;04;41

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Did your father ever, you know, in addition to some of the Jim Crow experiences, did he ever share what it was like living in Florida in—and correct me if I'm wrong—but around the 20s and 30s in Orlando?

00;04;41 - 00;05;55

REGGIE FINLAYSON: Well, he was born in 24, so, yeah, I would have been the, you know, going into the 30s. And he came of age around World War II time. You know, he had, good friends. I think he felt he had a good education. He actually got to meet, Mary McLeod Bethune. He went to, what was that? Florida A&M when he was young. So he got to got to meet her. And there's a picture that he happens to be, not as part of the group, but he shows up in between, Eleanor Roosevelt and, and, Mary McLeod Bethune when, Roosevelt was visiting her. I guess that would have been Daytona Beach. So he, you know, interesting things to say

about Florida. And it was, was a different time. He was also, you know, a minister son. So that had, you know, other things attached to it.

00;05;55 - 00;06;05

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Right? Absolutely. And can you talk to me about your grandfather's experience in Coconut Grove? You know, as a minister, during his time?

00;06;05 - 00;08;21

REGGIE FINLAYSON: Well, Coconut Grove, he he, built the building that the church is housed in now, when he got there, [it] was the oldest black church in, in the Miami area. And, Coconut Grove originally was kind of, more Caribbean, Bahamian, a lot. And, so he was ministering to those folks and it was a much it was not a black township like, Eatonville, but it was more of a small, enclave that was largely black. And, I think he, he certainly had a powerful impact on the church itself. And I think he appreciated that. And he still, the family is still beloved by the church. He you know, when you talk about experiences, he was very aware of the racial divide, and it is interesting that he was a lifelong Republican when you think about Republicans today. But in his time, the Republicans were the more progressive party. And so he was a lifelong Republican. But he once told me a story. He was very light skinned, and he, he enjoyed, sports. So he went to a horse racing track, and he was ushered into an area, and he looked around and, asked himself where all the black folks were because he realized he was in the white area, and he looked across and black folks were standing up in that area, and he found himself in the white area where they had bleachers where people could sit. And I remember him telling telling that story. So he was keenly aware of that racial divide, even though he himself was not a very dark skinned man.

00;08;21 - 00;08;28

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Right. And did you did you ever attend the church or visit the church in Miami?

00;08;28 - 00;09;12

REGGIE FINLAYSON: Oh yeah. Yeah, yeah. And my grandmother and aunts were very much involved. So yeah, I'd spent time there, I didn't but my cousins would stay for longer periods of time. I usually come down on vacations. But yeah, that was a big part of, my family's life. My, my grandmother, aunts, both aunts were very talented singers, so they were involved with the music in the church, and as, the first wife or the first lady of the church, my grandmother was very involved in church activities.

00;09;12 - 00;09;19

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: And can you name the church one more time for me? And also, is it still existing? Does it still exist?

00;09;19 - 00;09;50

REGGIE FINLAYSON: Oh, yeah. Yeah, it's still in existence. Macedonia Missionary Baptist Church in Coconut Grove. What is that on Charles Avenue, I believe is the the street name and, yeah, it's it was founded in the 1890s, about 93 or so, from my recollection. But, you know, I don't have those papers in front of me.

00;09;50 - 00;09;55

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: And your family continues to own the, it's operation?

00;09;55 - 00;09;56

REGGIE FINLAYSON: What about the operation?

00;09;56 - 00;10;00

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Your family continues to own the church's operations?

00;10;00 - 00;11;10

REGGIE FINLAYSON: Well, my grandfather, died some years ago, so, no, the minister is not related to us. No, it doesn't get passed on like that, but they still have very fond memories of my grandfather. And they have his picture still hanging in the church. And, people, you know, when I go there, they're very, you know, have good things to say about my aunts and my, my aunt's grandmother and grandfather. Although there are fewer people to talk that way because, they've gotten much older, and those people are dying out. My aunt passed away about a year and a half ago, and she was 103. So that's going back. And interestingly, she knew Zora Neale Hurston as well. Their paths crossed because they were both in the same sorority, Zetas. And also, my aunt was a librarian. And so knew her through that channel as well.

00;11;10 - 00;11;14

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Wow. Fascinating. And do you know any other stories of that connection?

00;11;15 - 00;11;59

REGGIE FINLAYSON: Well, the the no, she didn't have a lot of stories. She didn't talk a lot other than just to say that they knew one another. And she kind of she liked Zora Neale Hurston. But I know her Zeta sisters talk a lot about about Zora Neale Hurston and of course, their stories are, often rooted in this, this area, you know, they are loosely based on where, like, *Their Eyes were Watching God*, you know, loosely based on the people who lived here and, the town and so forth. [A bee interrupted the interview]. Yeah. I don't think he'll sting you. He's just interested in the smells.

00;11;59 - 00;12;14

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Yeah. And how important do you think your grandfather's practice and the church in general was for the black community in Coral Gables, Miami, more broadly?

00;12;14 - 00;13;52

REGGIE FINLAYSON: Well, I think he was, a good minister. You know, the black church, did things for the community. You know, it was a way of even though people don't like the idea of collecting tithes and donating to the church. But that money can then go on for educational purposes for, incubators, for business. So he tried to do things that would move the black community along, I thought. And I think he was an honest minister who ministered to the to the needs of his congregation. So he was not, a big race man in the sense of marching with Martin Luther King or that kind of thing. He did know King and as a matter of fact, my father and

King were classmates and friends. They both went to Morehouse together, and, and, you know, my grandfather knew the senior King because they were in the same convention, the National Baptist Convention. So he he was, you know, a race man in a sense, and would push things, but that wasn't his main focus, I guess I would say. Whereas, you know, King demonstrated and of course, King was younger. He was, you know, in the next generation.

00;13;53 - 00;14;01

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: And can you share with me a story from, you know, your dad's time with King as classmates?

00;14;01 - 00;16;19

REGGIE FINLAYSON: Well, you know, one of the things that—he he, got king into the fraternity. So King was an Alpha as well. So he he was a person who mentored him in that process. And as a child, during the Civil Rights activity, my father was instrumental in bringing him to Milwaukee, Wisconsin, which was also a place where there were demonstrations for fair housing and desegregation and so forth. And my dad still has the correspondence between the two of them setting that up and pictures of him in Milwaukee as well. But, you know, while my dad was at Morehouse, which is a historic Black institution, there were, a number of people, Loren Bennett, I don't know if you ever heard of him, but he was a great journalist who worked for Ebony magazine and was a senior editor, wrote the book *Before the Mayflower*, if you ever heard of that. But he was at Morehouse at that time. And Benjamin Oldmays, who was the chancellor, I guess you would call him, was there at that time when King was there. So there were—he talks a lot about how leaders were mentored at the time that King was in college. So, you know, King is perhaps the most famous, but there were people who from that college around the, around the world who did very interesting things, including Spike Lee went to Morehouse. And so you know, that continues in later generations as well. And if you ever saw the movie *School Days*, that's kind of a parody of the Atlanta University scene. And it wasn't hopefully as bad as he makes it out to be. But, you know, a lot of great people came through those institutions.

00;16;19 - 00;16;25

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Right. And your father, what was his occupation or his career?

00;16;25 - 00;17;09

REGGIE FINLAYSON: He was a doctor. Yeah. well, he's still still alive, but retired. An OBGYN doctor and he studied medicine at Meharry, which is in Nashville. My mom was, was a nurse, and that's where they met. And hence, you know, I ended up being born in Nashville. And of course, Nashville was also a center for Civil Rights activities as well. So, and I was born in '54—that's the same year of *Brown versus the Board of Education*—so, you know, that civil rights thing was there.

00;17;09 - 00;17;21

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Yeah, same month that it got passed. May of 1954. Yeah. So you mentioned your mom. Does your mother also have Florida connections through her family history?

00;17;21 - 00;17;51

REGGIE FINLAYSON: No, she was born in Cincinnati, but her family came from Alabama. But Cincinnati is just across the Ohio River and—in Ohio from Kentucky. So even though it's technically sort of a northern city, it had lots of southern roots. But no, my mom grew up in Cincinnati—and they—and she was a nurse. So they met in Nashville.

00;17;52 - 00;18;02

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: And you've—you've been based in Milwaukee ever since your childhood, essentially?

00;18;02 - 00;18;19

REGGIE FINLAYSON: Well, I went to school in Philadelphia and so lived there. In New York, also in California. Yeah, but I'm back in Milwaukee, but I've lived in most of the East and West Coast.

00;18;19 - 00;18;36

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: And given that very diverse experiences across different places in the United States, how have you—have you seen any changes in racial conditions since, you know, your formative years and in all those different locations?

00;18;36 - 00;20;18

REGGIE FINLAYSON: Well, I think it's, one step forward, two steps back, two steps forward, one step back. So I've seen kind of an ebb and flow. You know, I think when I was younger in the 70s, you know, you kind of had the height of progressive thinking. But, as the 80s came in, particularly with Ronald Reagan, you had a shift back to the right that I think has culminated in our current presidential administration. So I've seen things get better, but I've also seen them get worse. You know, in terms of, political violence, it may not be the Klan or other groups that are doing it as much, but you have police violence and, you know, there were memorandums of understanding that have now been abrogated by the current administration, so you have to think that that will become more of an issue again. So I've seen it go up and down, you know, there have been some good things like, school desegregation, although, you know, as it's been desegregated, then you have the charter school and the religious school thing coming out. So I think it's better in some ways, but where—there's a big push to try to get us back to the 1950s.

00;20;18 - 00;20;23

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: What brings you in here today at the Zora Festival in Eatonville, Florida?

00;20;23 - 00;20;57

REGGIE FINLAYSON: Well, I came down here specifically for this. I've wanted to do it. I'm a Zora Neale Hurston fan, and so I, I, retired from teaching. I'm a writer and teacher as well. So it was never convenient for the beginning of the semester. So, as I've retired, I finally had time, so I decided to come down. So I drove down from Milwaukee specifically for this, and so that's why I'm here.

00;20;57 - 00;21;04

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: And did you teach in, in high school? What levels did you teach?

00;21;04 - 00;21;05

REGGIE FINLAYSON: College.

00;21;05 - 00;21;05

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: College?

00;21;05 - 00;21;45

REGGIE FINLAYSON: Yeah. Taught English, Writing, and Literature. Yeah. So I would teach some of Zora Neale Hurston work and, other black writers. So, you know, I've always been very moved by by her. Going back, I was introduced to Zora Neale Hurston in the 70s and have read lots of her work over the years, and it's been fun to see new pieces released that they've discovered. So, you know, it's exciting to be here.

00;21;45 - 00;21;56

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: And, you know, why do you think, an event like this, The Zora Neale Hurston Festival of the Arts and Humanities, is important?

00;21;56 - 00;23;35

REGGIE FINLAYSON: Well, Milwaukee is known as a city of festivals because we have a big festival called Summer Fest, which brings in a lot of people. And it used to be for just, 14 days, but they changed it and spread it out over the whole month of July. But that is just about having fun. And, you know, that's a good reason to have a festival. And we have ethnic festivals, Greek Fest, Indian Summer, African World Fest—all for all kind of festivals, but none of them celebrate a writer. And I think it's amazing that this festival celebrates a literary figure. And so I think that's very important. And I've been so inspired to see all the young people here, you know, even kindergartners knowing about Zora Neale Hurston and a couple high school guys buttonholed me, and asked if they could talk to me, and they were telling me about Zora Neale Hurston and her time here in Eatonville and books she wrote. And I just thought that was so inspiring to keep that alive, because she is an important writer. And, in the current climate where African American history and by extension literature, is getting suppressed, festivals like this keep...keep it alive. And I think that's important.

00;23;35 - 00;23;40

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Well, Reggie, thank you for sitting down with me and sharing a little bit of your life story. I really do appreciate it.

00;23;41 - 00;23;45

REGGIE FINLAYSON: You're welcome. Thank you. It's good to get it down.