



THE RUTH ANN OVERBECK
CAPITOL HILL HISTORY PROJECT

Interview with James C. Finley

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Interviewer: John Franzén

Transcriber: Gary L. Abrecht

FRANZEN: I'm John Franzén and I'm here today in Temple Hills, or you call it....

FINLEY: I call it Hillcrest. That goes back a number of years. They used to call it Hillcrest Heights, but for the Postal Service it's Temple Hills.

FRANZEN: I'm talking today with Jim Finley. Mr. Finley for many years was the proprietor of Finley's Auto Service and Finley's Gym and Boxing Club at 518 10th Street Northeast in Washington, and we're going to talk at some length about that place of business and that boxing club. But before we get into that, I'd like to go back in time, way to the beginning, and talk about where you came from, a little bit about your family and so forth. First of all, thank you Mr. Finley for agreeing to participate in this project.

FINLEY: My pleasure, if any assistance I can be.

FRANZEN: Tell me, Mr. Finley ... first of all, let's have your full name so we'll have that just for the record.

FINLEY: The name is James C. Finley, but everyone knows me by the name of Jim, shall I say, over the last thirty years.

FRANZEN: Where did you start out, where did you come from?

FINLEY: I originally came from Greenville, South Carolina—at least that's where I was born. But I love the country, a rural area. My grandfather lived in a place called Fountain Inn—same as a fountain [spells out the words Fountain Inn]—and he lived in a rural area on a sharecropper's farm. I loved the rural area and that's where I was, shall I say, more or less raised or brought up. That was eighteen miles south of Greenville, going on the route to Columbia.

FRANZEN: Your father's name was?

FINLEY: My father's name? This was my grandfather.

FRANZEN: I'm sorry, your grandfather.

FINLEY: My grandfather's name was Calvin Milam [spells out the name].

FRANZEN: Okay, and tell me about that farm.

FINLEY: Well, being young at the time, from about seven, eight years old or what have you, it was what we called a sharecropper's farm, and as far as the black community is concerned, a sharecropper's farm was the, shall I say, I think it was the third step from slavery. First we had slavery, then we had the Reconstruction period, and then we had what we call sharecropping. And sharecropping wasn't a whole

lot better than the first one. That simply means that you worked a farm because you had no resources to buy your seed or your grain or your stock, and as a result the person's land that you lived on you more or less what we called shared with him, and that's why we call it sharecropping. I was kind of young at the time, but I think it was something like fifty-fifty. We had a 21-acre cotton farm ...

FRANZEN: It was fifty-fifty on the share of the crop?

FINLEY: Yes. Now this is just what we call the main crop. You could plant your own garden or your own corn, but anything that was to be harvested or otherwise was kind of shared fifty-fifty.

FRANZEN: And what did you grow?

FINLEY: Cotton, cotton primarily. We had 21 acres of cotton. We grew ... we had our own garden, but primarily cotton as far as, shall I say, to make a living, or the resources came from. And we obviously had corn, and we had to have that, and wheat and barley and what have you, for the stock. We had cows and we had to feed the mules. I started to say horses, but we had mules at that time because horses are not very good, weren't bred for pulling a plow and so forth. If you weren't familiar with a rural area or farming, rather, you would be probably not aware of that, but horses don't pull a plow.

FRANZEN: And you had milk cows?

FINLEY: Yes, we did. Not for commercial in any way, just more or less for our own family, and at this family I was brought up in a house with two uncles and my grandfather. There were no women in the house. My uncles were not married and my grandmother, she had passed, and I never knew her. But just the two uncles and my grandfather. So that means I had to learn to do a lot of things.

FRANZEN: And you were the only child?

FINLEY: Now if you remember now, I said I was living with my grandfather. My mother was living in Greenville, which is eighteen miles north of the place, the farm, where I was. I had two sisters—there was three of us, myself and two sisters, but my sisters were living with my mother until she came to DC here—we call it DC—Washington. She came in 1936, and in the meantime I was living on this farm with my grandfather, simply because I loved it. I liked the farm.

FRANZEN: And you were probably handy to have there as a worker.

FINLEY: Oh yes, very much so, but there was a handicap in that. You didn't have a choice of going to school or working during that era, and if your chores needed to be done on the farm, which was pretty much done except for the diehard winter [months], you simply worked. And the schooling at that time wasn't no more than about three or four months out of a year. That was during the summer period, shall

we say, otherwise you worked. So you didn't get too much of a chance to get a very sound education. That was certain segments of the community.

FRANZEN: How many years of formal schooling did you get?

FINLEY: I finished high school, and that was about being a good fellow. I was never what we call very smart. The whole [elementary school] classroom which was about 35 or 40 students in a one-room schoolhouse with one teacher, and you can imagine how much of a background you can get of an education behind that. So, I did finish high school [in Washington] by being a good fellow and bringing the teacher an apple and not rocking the boat [chuckles]. I learned to be a diplomat quite early.

FRANZEN: Well, tell me about how you got from that place to this place. When was that, and how did that come about?

FINLEY: Well, as I said before, my mother came to DC in about 1936. Well, I came in 1943. My mother was a domestic worker, so funds were quite short. It was simply a matter of having enough money to send down to South Carolina for me to come up, from a transportation point of view. I did visit my mother, my grandfather and I, each year—what we call lay-by time. Lay-by time simply means the farms are generally worked from beginning in March: March, April, May, June, July. In the latter part of July it slacks off and we have the month of August, what we call the lay-by month. In other words, you wait until the crop harvests and so forth. So my grandfather and I used to come visit my mother. But in 1943 my two uncles were drafted in the service and my grandfather was sixty years older than I am at that time. He was about seventy and I was only about ten, which means that the farm kept going down and down. We tried to work it ourselves, the two of us, for one year, but it didn't work out too successful. So as a result, my mother sent after me and I came to Washington, D.C. in 1943, and I started at Browne Junior High School, which is at 24th and Benning Road, in the seventh grade.

FRANZEN: One thing I didn't ask you, and I should have, what year were you born—how old are you?

FINLEY: 1929. I'm seventy-two years old.

FRANZEN: So, you came to town and you actually went to school in Washington?

FINLEY: Yes, I was only fourteen years old when I came.

FRANZEN: Tell me what the neighborhood was like at that point. Tell me about the school.

FINLEY: Well, the schools, they were segregated at that time, in the early 40s. But they had what I consider good schools. As a kid, you're really not aware whether it's a good school, or I won't say a bad school, but whether it's superior and you're getting a good education. But I, shall I say, enjoyed it, but I

just couldn't catch on too readily, by having what I consider a weak background. I hope I don't emphasize that it was a crutch for me, but the basis of any foundation is a beginning. If you don't have a good background, such as learning eight parts of speech and multiplication tables and different things like that, that's basic, so ... and as I said before, I found the schools very good here, and I enjoyed going to them. I didn't have, shall I say, a strong enough background to go to college, even though I've always cherished education. And one of the saddest days of my life, I wrote to what we call Miner's Teachers College—now the DC college, the one up on Connecticut Avenue. Is that DC College they call it?

FRANZEN: It's UDC.

FINLEY: Thank you. That's an offspring of the black school that was called DC College, where you usually went for an academic course, but you had to have a pretty good academic background in order to get in. As I said before, one of the saddest days with me was to write them a letter and they sent me back a nice polite letter that my academic background—I don't think they used the word "academic"—but anyway that I wasn't quite smart enough to get in. So I decided to, shall I say, to try to cultivate and do things on my own. I'm very good with my hands. There are very few things that I can't do or at least attempt to try, from agriculture or from a trade point of view. Obviously I'm not as good as a professional with them but I certainly tried.

FRANZEN: Growing up on a farm probably taught you some of that.

FINLEY: Very much so. When the wheel broke on the wagon or the horse needed shoes, you didn't call up somebody to come and do it, you did it yourself. And that gives you a strong background. It was rough going through at the time, but I've got down on my knees and prayed [thanks] many times for that background, believe it or not. Yup.

FRANZEN: Well I grew up on a farm myself and I learned a lot of those things, and it comes in very handy at times.

FINLEY: Yes it does.

FRANZEN: Tell me, exactly where did you live when you first moved to Washington?

FINLEY: I lived exactly at 521 L Street Northeast, and that I won't say is what we call Capitol Hill but it's in proximity of the Capitol. It's 521 L Street Northeast, and during that time most of that section from L Street, 5th Street, 6th Street, 7th and so forth, quite a few Italian people lived primarily in those sections, and they more or less started moving out in the middle forties and down through the forties, but they were primarily the people who were there at that time.

FRANZEN: So it was a mixed neighborhood.

FINLEY: Yes, it was.

FRANZEN: Now this is something I've always wondered about. Washington, D.C. was a segregated city at that time, it was the era of Jim Crow, and yet you had people, blacks and whites, living in many cases side by side, sometimes working side by side. Now, you saw Jim Crow in D.C. and you also saw it in South Carolina. How would you compare the two?

FINLEY: Oh, it's almost like oranges and apples, night and day. You had what we call violence in South Carolina, and I could quote you some stories from the so-called Ku Klux Klan that would make your head swim. I was young, so I weren't exactly a victim of them, but this particular time I was coming from church—I always loved to go to church. One night ... and when your what we call buddies or people that you ride with—usually one fellow had a car—and believe or not, this might sound strange to you, but when you rode with a buddy in a car on a main road, if you lived a half a mile down that side road it was a custom he didn't turn off his route and go down there. You got off at that main, where your side road was, and you walked that way. And the reason I started on the side road was when you asked me about the segregation and so forth ... this particular night, it was on a Sunday night, I saw these cars coming with lights and so forth, which was unusual for that many cars, it was several cars, and these people, white that is, young fellows, they were looking for a particular fellow who lived in that neighborhood. They didn't know where he lived. I say neighborhood—the houses were very far apart. But anyway I was, I won't say captured, but they made me get in the car, and on the floor—that is because the car was crowded—and tell where this particular boy lived. And during that period of time they couldn't get him out of the house because they knew he and his brother-in-law had weapons. So one of the fellows in the—I don't want to call them Klan because they didn't have the hoods on but that's what it adds up to—and lo and behold, one of the fellows who were in the group was a fellow who had come the previous Saturday (notice I said this was on a Sunday night) down to my grandfather's farm to use our bloodhounds to hunt rabbits, believe it or not. To hunt. Well obviously he stayed kind of back, didn't think I'd recognize him, but I did, and no conversation or anything like that. But the reason I'm leading up to the story, after they put me into the car, they couldn't get the fellow that they was after to come out of the house. No doubt they was going to beat him up for some little minor infraction, something that happened in town, not something ... but to be specific about it, this fellow had a '35 Chevrolet. All the other black community, or practically all of them, had either '29 Fords or 1930 Fords, so when you had a '35 Chevrolet that was kind of somewhat upscale and he was sitting in front of what we call a cafe. A cafe is somewhat of a meeting place in a small Southern town, practically all the small Southern towns, where the young blacks would meet, and he had his foot up on the dash and these people came by and says to him, quote unquote, "Nigger, get your foot down." Just simply because he was sitting up and one word led to another, so that's why they were looking for him that particular night. So I'm getting back to, after

they had picked me up in the car and sent me in the window thinking if the people in the house, which was the fellow they were looking for and his brother-in-law, had fired a gun, I was the one that would get killed or shot, but it so happened that I screamed and they recognized my voice and knew it was me. So I managed to get in the house, but the ones who were outside they simply got tired, presumably, and they went on off.

And I explained it in that long manner to show you the difference between the segregation there—when I say there I mean in South Carolina—and what we call the segregation here, but yet it's a bit of exaggeration to say that they lived—when I say “they” I mean blacks and whites—lived next door to each other. This is going back to the early forties and the late thirties. That was not so true. Now you had some, but very few, very few. Usually you had pockets. As I said before on 6th Street, L Street, 7th Street, all this is Northeast, 3rd Street, mostly Italian people lived. And they had a church on L Street which was right next door to 521—and that church was 519—and that was their community. So it's a little bit different. Mostly the segregation here in D.C. was from, shall I say, a job standpoint of view. Believe or not, most of the black community, for what we call a good-paying job, you either worked in the Post Office or in the hotels. Post Office was considered ... or construction work, some type of work of that sort. They didn't have a single black face on the ... they had very few on mail delivery. They didn't have a single black face on the beverage trucks, like soda trucks, beer wine and so forth. Those jobs were reserved for, shall I say, whites, and many others. But the primary job, and I repeat myself, was for the hotels. Oh, yes I left one out—the two major sources of employment that made a little better than what we call regular salary, which was 35 dollars a week—I worked many a week for 35 dollars, and that was half a day on a Saturday—was the Post Office and the Printing Office. I forgot the Printing Office. Post Office and Printing Office.

FRANZEN: Is that the Government Printing Office?

FINLEY: Yes. The one at North Capitol. Those were cherished jobs.

FRANZEN: Okay, and that was because the Federal government had a policy against segregation at that time, is that why?

FINLEY: Well, I don't think you'll find that written on paper anywhere [laughs] but it was from a—what's the word—subliminal way. Covert way.

FRANZEN: Okay, so there was segregation in employment. Let's talk a little more about housing. You said that there were pockets. There were neighborhoods, or pieces of neighborhoods, that were kind of understood to be ... you had a white block or a black block.

FINLEY: Right, correct.

FRANZEN: What about apartment buildings, were they all one or the other?

FINLEY: Oh, definitely so. One hundred percent. They were one or the other. In other words, you simply did not as a black person, you did not live in this apartment. That's almost hard to believe, but they were one hundred percent one way or another, and the blacks had very few what we might consider upscale apartments. One of the first upscale apartments with, shall I say, shopping in it, a barber shop and different things like that, was on the corner of 14th and Rhode Island Avenue Northeast. That's a little out of the Capitol Hill area, but that was one of the first. And I can't help but mention this before I forget it, even since I was at 518 10th Street, that when I first came there in the sixties there were a few whites up and down Maryland Avenue and so forth. But on up after 1968—and '68 was the turning point, when Martin Luther King [was killed] and then we had what we call the riots here in the city and so forth—the whites almost moved out one hundred percent, and if you saw a white face in the neighborhood, usually they were lost. That's a bit of exaggeration, but I got the greatest pleasure of going out when I see a tag from out of town and they would be near the corner, and I remember them right near the corner of 10th and F Street Northeast, but what they would be looking for would be 10th and F Street Northwest. That was where the Lincoln Theater and the Ford Theater—not the Lincoln Theater, but where Abraham Lincoln was shot—and that's on the tourist [maps], but it's kind of hard to distinguish for some people between the Northeast and the Northwest ... not hard to distinguish but it's easy to get mixed up. And I would go out and explain and invariably they would be looking for 10th and F Street Northwest instead of 10th and F Northeast. And I say that to say this: these were whites, shall I say, with out of town tags and, I don't know, I kind of enjoyed doing it. I love to give directions.

FRANZEN: And what about places to shop? That too was a matter of ... there were establishments where you just kind of understood you didn't go? Or was that pretty well mixed?

FINLEY: No, not really, except for some of the so-called upscale stores, you might not have gone into those, because they wouldn't permit you to even try on a hat or try the shoes on or what have you. Now these are upscale stores and we had always had Hecht's, Lansburgh and a few of the other stores around town. They were not the ... the most diehard segregated part of that was the eating facilities. Each one of them had a little, I won't say cafeteria—you weren't permitted to eat in those. Oh, and the restaurants themselves were segregated, as well as the theaters. Now the white youth community has always been welcome to the Howard Theater here, that's at 7th and T Street Northwest, that's where we had the legendary black, shall I say, stars, musicians, like, just to name a few, Lionel Hampton, Henry ... I started to say Henry Armstrong ... the fellow that blew the trumpet. Louis Armstrong. And practically all of them came to the Howard Theater. As someone once said—might not be quoted exactly—that music is a

language for all people, and, believe it or not, the music of that culture will bring people together more than practically anything else.

FRANZEN: That's true ...

FINLEY: I guess, I don't know whether I overlooked a point of saying that the whites or the young people would come up to the Howard Theater. You know, obviously not like it is now where we got a lot of bee-bop or what have you.

FRANZEN: And at the Howard Theater, would people ... would whites and blacks sit together, or were there different sections ...

FINLEY: Oh yeah, right together, one community. This is back in the forties. That was almost unheard of, as far as the community is concerned.

FRANZEN: I don't want to dwell too long on this, because we mainly want to talk about the auto service and the gym and so on, but if, at that time in D.C., a black made the mistake of going to the "wrong place," quote unquote, whether it be a restaurant or a store or something, what would happen? Would they simply be asked to leave? How much of a confrontation did this typically involve?

FINLEY: No, very little if any. They would simply been asked to leave, and most of the places, believe it or not (I often use the term "believe it or not"—I try to express what I'm saying) you had signs on some of the restaurants or the beer clubs down on H Street. And H Street ... 8th and H was one of the main corridors of the H Street area. Most of the merchants, if not all of them, were white. There were no black merchants, even from a, shall I say, a shoeshine stand or a barber shop or anything like that. And you had segregated theater, you had the Plymouth Theater, that was all black, and the Atlas theater, that was ... which has been closed for some time. Someone should really revitalize that place, it's a good place to be. Now what was your original question? There was something I wanted to answer.

FRANZEN: [laughs] I think I may have lost my train of thought too ...

FINLEY: You was asking me about the restaurants ...

FRANZEN: How did you know which place to go to and which not to go to? And you're saying basically they were posted, there were signs ...

FINLEY: Well, not every one of them, but you got to know. First of all, as a black person it had become part of your culture. You certainly, if you were walking along, and you would sense that by simply going in, in certain cases, if you start into a place, went to the door of a place ... now this is mostly what we call bars, beer joints or something like that—I call them beer joints for lack of a better word, where they serve

beverages and so forth—somehow or another you just simply didn't go into those places, because you had young fellows who would get kind of high on drinking and so forth and wanted to [unintelligible]. But as a whole, we just didn't mix. The theaters as well. We didn't go to theaters as well.

FRANZEN: And you just kind of knew from growing up in the neighborhood which places you go to, which you don't ...

FINLEY: And this offshoot of that same question: I am seventy-two years old. Most of the time I tell people I'm seventy-three, because I ... for various reasons, but anyway we'll get back to that. And some of the young fellows, in talking to them and asking some of the same questions I'm asking you, some of the young black fellows will say: "Well why did you take it, why did you do it?" It had simply become a custom, a part of the so-called situation and so forth, and you'd just become part of it and you didn't rock the boat.

FRANZEN: Okay, now, you arrived in the mid 1940's. World War II was still on at that time.

FINLEY: Oh yes, very much so. World War II didn't go out until 1945.

FRANZEN: Can you think of anything particular about the city or the neighborhood at that time that reflected what was going on in the larger world, in World War II? What was Washington like during World War II? You didn't see it before that, obviously, but...

FINLEY: Well, you had a multitude of people here, you know, for government work and so forth, especially down on Constitution Avenue and Connecticut Avenue. They had what we call a lot of temporary buildings where they would work at. That's down there where the ... down on the Mall. A good many of those were government buildings, and about once or twice, once a year, they had what we call a war bond drive down there on the Monument grounds, where the Monument is now, you have all types of...

FRANZEN: A what drive?

FINLEY: Bond drives—selling war bonds.

FRANZEN: Oh, bonds.

FINLEY: Maybe I didn't make the word clear—bonds, war bonds. And you would have tanks and all types of Army equipment there where people would come and see them. But again, back to your original question. If I'm not mistaken, Washington back during the forties—something like '42, '43 and '44—I believe the population was very close to a million people here, but now it's dropped down to around 800,000 or a little bit less, or what have you. [JF: Actually under 600,000 in the 2000 census.]

FRANZEN: So all these people came in because of the war.

FINLEY: That's right.

FRANZEN: Okay. Now, going into the 1950's, you talked about 1968 as a key year in terms of the ...

FINLEY: Right, on account of the transition ...

FRANZEN: But there was a big transition also, wasn't there, in the mid 1950's. In 1954, when the Supreme Court decided Brown versus Board of Education, that desegregated the schools, that must have had a big impact on the neighborhood.

FINLEY: Well, it did, it did. In fact you might say it was more so, or just as much as it was in 1968. I kind of overlooked that, but it definitely did. Because District schools, even to this day in 2001, have never been really integrated. Somehow or another the schools get a very bad name as far as being good schools, but I don't agree with that a hundred percent. There's always room for improvement, but we have a pocket of schools ... in fact there's one that's only about three blocks from the garage where I spent forty-one years. I don't know the name of it but it's right there on 9th and D Street, where it's ... I believe they call it a magnet school or something like that, and that school takes in young white kids and some black go there as well, but they're upscale and it's not just ... it's supposed to be a public school, at that time, but it's really not a public school. It's who you know and what you know in order to get your kid in that school.

FRANZEN: Now, was the fifties the time when those Italian families that you mentioned left the city, or left the neighborhood, or did that happen later?

FINLEY: Through the late forties. Through the late forties they began to leave the city as far as the pocket areas were concerned, especially where I was brought up there at what we call 6th and L. That simply means 6th Street and L Street. They lived all around there, and it would begin to be a mixture of white and black, but eventually they did move. And also the same thing up and down Maryland Avenue, from 15th and Maryland Avenue, which is Benning Road, all the way up Maryland Avenue to the Capitol, that was mostly white.

FRANZEN: So that started to happen, that migration started to happen, before Brown versus Board of Education. It was just a matter of people becoming affluent and wanting to move to the suburbs?

FINLEY: Absolutely, absolutely. Well I wouldn't say that, I'm not going to say that one hundred percent. Actually, just as a matter of opinion, but I think it was a matter of not wanting to, shall I say, mix or have your kids go to school with black kids.

FRANZEN: Once Brown versus Board of Education came through, the city dropped a tremendous amount in white population ...

FINLEY: Oh, it did. Very much so.

FRANZEN: And then of course '68 and the riots, that pretty much scared a lot of others out.

FINLEY: Property was going ... If you're familiar with 10th and Maryland Avenue, there's a fellow named Herb, he's a builder, that lives right on the corner of 10th Street and Maryland Avenue. It was a great big house there that a doctor used to live in. And the reason I know these things is there used to be another doctor that lived across the street. And this lady, white lady, she practiced medicine until she was something like in her nineties. I went to her funeral and everything. She was a whole part of the community, but she practiced medicine all that time and she more or less used to love to tell the stories about the neighborhood and so forth. Right along there on Maryland Avenue had a lot of the what we call carriage houses. That was before they renovated them. And many years later the conversation came about ... there is what we call, I'll call it a pole. It's something like a two-by-eight that sticks out over your window on your second floor, and I didn't know what it was for, and I asked the lady—she happened to [be having] work done on her car—and she started to tell me about it. It was a carriage house and they used that with a hook on it to draw up whatever, mostly feed. And usually your servants would live in the carriage house along with the feed and the stock. And incidentally that garage where I was at 518 10th Street, that was a livery stable. If you know anything about a rural area, a livery stable is where they shoe horses. Now the back part of that, looking at it from the 10th Street side, from 10th Street facing the garage, on the back part of it is a long shape, a rectangular shape—I believe that's a rectangle—and if you're from a rural area you know that horse and buggy carriages were always made long, where you work on them and shoe horses. It's something like a garage, except that you worked on shoeing horses and what have you. Now the other part was added on years later, so basically what I'm saying is that that was a livery stable, but it has always been for repairing of automobiles and cars and what have you. I see some old signs and some literature that's on the wall there going back to the 20's and the 30's when we first started having automobiles and cars. It's always been a garage.

FRANZEN: So it was a garage before you owned it.

FINLEY: Oh yes, very much so.

FRANZEN: I'll flip the tape.

[STARTING TAPE 1, SIDE 2]

FRANZEN: So, how did you come to own and operate Finley's Auto Service?

FINLEY: Well, I was in the service in 1951, '52 and '53. I was drafted in, and when I got out in 1953 another fellow and I was in what we call a social club together, just a social club where boys meet girls and what have you, and he was a little smarter than I am, so he suggested that we go into some type of business, not knowing what type of business. He had about the same education as I did, as far as finishing high school. He first suggested a cleaners, what we call a pressing club—where you clean clothes. So we went around and looked at a few places and didn't find anything available. There's a section in the Washington Post that's called "Business Opportunity" and he knew about that. I didn't even know there was such a section. So he looked in there and he saw "Garages and Gas Stations." He saw a gas station, so he and I went to this gas station. This was at 2nd and M Street Southwest, it was right below South Capitol Street. And the fellow that was in there ... it was really, shall I say, just a front for a numbers or bookie place. We didn't have what we call legal policies now—lottery rather—and he weren't particular about staying there, so he accepted three hundred dollars, just for the privilege of us getting in. He had no gas in the ground. He was really just using it for a front. He got out and we came in, and I started from there. Now that's down in Southwest.

FRANZEN: Second and M?

FINLEY: M. M as in Mary.

FRANZEN: Southeast?

FINLEY: No, Southwest.

FRANZEN: Southwest, okay.

FINLEY: Visualize South Capitol Street. At M Street. That's your main part there and as you're going downtown it's only two blocks down. It's right across the street from a school on the right side called Anthony Bowen. But it's big apartments and so forth there now. You wouldn't even know it was the same section. And incidentally down through that area was one of the first areas that ... what's that word? Reconstruct? Revitalize?

FRANZEN: Urban renewal?

FINLEY: Yeah, urban renewal. That was one of the first places that started. And all down through that area and where the Southwest Freeway, all those were just homes. And a lot of those places, even next door to the gas station, had outside toilet facilities and—most of them had running water—but they had outside toilet facilities, and believe it or not, that's only less than about an eight or ten minute walk from the Capitol, where those things were. And this was in 1953. So it hasn't been such a long, long time.

FRANZEN: So you leased this place, this gas station?

FINLEY: Yes, I leased this place there, and I was there from 1953 to '56. And then I had to move because of the reconstruction or what have you there, and I went to 7th and Rhode Island Avenue. There was another gas station there. But I've always favored what I call repair, and I went out looking, through the newspaper and the real estate places, and I saw where there was a garage at 518 10th Street. And when the Luskin Real Estate Company, at 14th and Rhode Island Avenue Northwest ... there used to be a Luskin, L-U-S-K-I-N, Real Estate Company there, and they are the ones that had advertised in the newspaper. But when I went to inquire about it, I disputed the lady that there was a garage there. Because it's in a residential section, plus it's sitting back—and I've had more people to go up and down the street, shall I say, looking for it, and could easily pass it. When I was there I kept it what I call clean. I didn't have a lot of junk cars around, because invariably when you're looking for a garage, somehow your mind's eye focuses on a lot of cars sitting around. So the people would very easily pass the place and so forth. And incidentally that is what we call non-conforming use, and from a real estate standpoint of view I understand that you can't make any major repairs. Some people call it the grandfather clause that's there now. You can stay there, shall I say, X number of years, but you can't make any major repairs.

I mentioned something—I don't know whether I finished or not—about that big house right on the corner, very nice Spanish-type house now, that was built there. I bought that property. And the reason I mentioned this, this was in 1968. It was owned by a Jewish lady, elder lady, and....

FRANZEN: This is where?

FINLEY: On the corner of 10th Street and Maryland Avenue.

FRANZEN: Okay.

FINLEY: And there was a great big house there, a very large house. And one fellow bought the house, but he turned it into what we call apartments. To put it another way, there was at least, without a bit of exaggerating—it was a very large house—there was at least fifty kids in that house. So you know how long that house lasts. So after it got ransacked and everything, and they had a fire there—didn't burn it out completely—the lady wanted to sell the place. And she had to, shall I say, beg me to buy the place for eighteen thousand dollars. For eighteen thousand dollars. But the Catch-22 to it is that I was paying something like \$300 a month for rent, and all I had to do was give her a thousand dollars and continue to pay the \$300 a month. It was a kind of a made up contract.

FRANZEN: So you were living in that house?

FINLEY: No, no, I never lived in it. I had the garage. I had the garage. I was living upstairs ...

FRANZEN: Okay, at the garage.

FINLEY: I had the garage. And I bought that place for cars. If you know anything about automobile repairs, especially in urban areas, you can never have too much space, and I had a pretty good business going there. I used to do body and fender repair work instead of mechanical work, primarily. I did both, but primarily body and fender repairs.

FRANZEN: And you had already been doing repair work, of course, at those two gas stations ...

FINLEY: Oh yes, but not a lot. Those two gas stations I had—see if you recognize the word—is ESSO gas stations, instead of EXXON. I often wondered why they changed it to EXXON, because ESSO became, or was at that time, synonymous with gasoline. I've heard people say in foreign countries, a person will come and say "ESSO, ESSO, two gallons of ESSO," and it wouldn't even be an ESSO gas. And I often think of the story about Frigidaire. The dumbest salesman in the world would tell you he does not have a Frigidaire, because the person is not really looking for a Frigidaire, not so much nowadays, but this is going back, you follow what I'm saying?

FRANZEN: Yeah, I do. It became a generic word for refrigerator. It's like Kleenex.

So, Finley's Auto Service started up, but we have not even talked yet about boxing. Now, I assume your interest in boxing must go back quite a long way.

FINLEY: Oh, it does, even from a kid eight, nine, and ten years old, in the farm with my grandfather. Like most any youngster going to school, a youngster's going to step on your toe, you're going to step on his, but I was always pretty good with my hands and we didn't use knives or anything at that time at all. We simply says, you know, what we call "put up your dukes" and we boxed, and usually I would come out pretty good on what I call boxing or fighting with your fists, your bare knuckles, just your fists.

FRANZEN: At what point did you get interested in boxing, the sport, as opposed to boxing to defend yourself on the schoolyard?

FINLEY: I've always been interested in boxing as a sport, primarily going back to the rural area in the South. This is during the Joe Louis era, and that was in the early 30's, 1932, '33, '34 and '36 or what have you. Because at that time you did not have—and listen to this—a single black face in any major sport. So it become kind of an icon, if that's the proper word to use, to kind of root for what have you. So that's why I became interested in boxing.

FRANZEN: So how were you aware of Joe Louis? Was this through the paper, the radio ...

FINLEY: Through the radio, through the radio. We didn't have a radio. A radio was a luxury, just the radio itself, and most of the black community didn't have radios. They had what we called loudspeakers. A loudspeaker is nothing but a just speaker that's in your house that you have tapped into the wire. When

I say tapped, not illegal in any way, but you've tapped it into the wire that's coming from five miles down the road, from the general store. He has a radio where he gets it in and then he pipes it to the people with the loudspeakers, which you pay something like three or four dollars per month for use.

FRANZEN: So that was like cable radio.

FINLEY: Yeah, yeah [laughter] I guess you might say that. I hadn't thought about it like that. And when major events would come on, such as President Roosevelt's speech, this is something that 99 percent of the people, or all of them, that was what they were listening to, and I use that as an example about the fights. When Joe Louis was fighting at that time, whenever he would fight, nothing else was on the radio. You only had one station, and my two uncles and I would go to the landlord's house and listen to the fight. In the kitchen of the house. Because you didn't mix. It was completely segregated and what have you at that time. We didn't mix at all. In fact you didn't really get overjoyed when Joe Louis knocked Arthur Godoy, Bob Pastor [spelling?] and a few of the others out at that time. You waited until you got outside. You just knew better.

FRANZEN: You couldn't celebrate in their house.

FINLEY: Well I won't say you couldn't, but you didn't. Which is really, see, I'm just rewording it, saying the same thing. Because there was such diehard segregation at that time 'till whites just simply did not, not everyone. Nothing is ever a never, whatever the situation is. You can't put all the people in the same group. But you just simply ... they just didn't want a black person to beat a white. In no way, shape or form.

FRANZEN: And yet you went to their house to listen to the fight on the radio, via this special wire, this line that came from the store.

FINLEY: They did, uh huh.

FRANZEN: So that sort of stimulated further interest in boxing.

FINLEY: Oh yes. That was the original question. It did, it did. Because, as I said before, there were no black faces in any of the major sports. So obviously that means football, baseball, hockey—even today you don't have but so many, it's not part of the black culture—none of the major sports, only boxing. That's the only thing I could root for. I keep using that word.

FRANZEN: Now down there, in South Carolina where you were living at that time, was there a regulation boxing ring somewhere in that area, where you could go ...

FINLEY: Oh, no! In fact only ...only, and I could go so far as to say recent years. Ali got out of the service, I mean not out of the service, but he got reinstated, Muhammad Ali, Cassius Clay, in ... I believe the early 70's, and that was the first bout that was held in Atlanta. And Atlanta ... I think it was a lot of black political officials there in the very beginning. But I'm saying all that to say this: The South has never been big on boxing, even to today, so there were no arenas or anything at all for boxing in the South.

FRANZEN: And yet you were enough interested in it just from what you knew was going on elsewhere to start to pursue that. So when did you actually get into boxing as a boxer? You did some...

FINLEY: Oh yeah, that was when I came to Washington, D.C. in 1943. I was only fourteen years old, but I started going to the gym and the boxing club, and I just loved boxing.

FRANZEN: Where was that? Where did you go?

FINLEY: On 6th and H Street Northeast there was a place called Apollo Athletic Club.

FRANZEN: Sixth and H?

FINLEY: Sixth and H. Ourisman Chevrolet was right across the street. It's Seth Stewart's [spelling?] place there now, but right across the street from there was what I call a bookie joint. It was run by a white fellow called Humphrey. Numbers was a big deal, and so forth. But in the back we had a boxing club. Fellow by the name of Mr. Glenn Drake [spelling?], white fellow, that's where I started training at. I just went into the gym and more or less showed some interest. And at that time, as long as you came in regular ... and I had 72 fights, and, from memory, I only lost less than five. I lost less than five fights and two draws, but I never learned to throw with my weight, with your shoulders. I learned what you're supposed to do in latter years. You have to turn your hip and your fist will throw with your weight. And when I was boxing the fellows used to say: Well, Jim you're slapping. To me, slapping means to take your hand and slap a hand open-handed. But what they meant was I was just throwing with my arms and with my hands. And I would fight on such endurance and courage and believing in staying in shape, so that's why I was able to win most of the fights.

FRANZEN: What weight class did you fight in?

FINLEY: 150.

FRANZEN: 150.

FINLEY: Middle-weight. I stayed there for about ... over ten years.

FRANZEN: Now, you say you fought these fights. Was this kind of a boxing league in the city? Did you go to other cities?

FINLEY: You had about four clubs in the city. You had the YMCA, which was all black, and you had the Christ Child House, which was at Sixth and C Street [Northeast]. [The building now, in 2001, houses the American Society of Interior Designers.] That was one of the first to start integration of the boxers back through the late forties. You had that club and you had the YMCA. In other words, you had four, not more than five clubs in the city here. And most of the boxing bouts were held by what I call the Golden Gloves tournaments, which was only held once a year, or what we call the AAU. AAU is an offshoot—[Amateur?] Athletic Association. It's a similar tournament to the Golden Gloves, but the Golden Gloves has a name that everybody knows, you know, the Gods of the Golden Gloves. But those were the two main tournaments that we had here in the city. But the fellow that I trained at his club, Mr. Glenn Drake, he had a lot of connection in rural areas. I even fought in a cow pasture [laughter]. The community was giving a picnic, and incidentally I think I fought a sleeper because boy did he beat me. A young white fellow. They don't call it a sleeper. This is when they put a professional on you and you don't know the difference. I forget the word. I fought him and he gave me a good shellacking. It was the community that was having something like a picnic and food and so forth, and boxing was a big deal. So Mr. Drake took the fellows up to this cow pasture and we fought in there.

FRANZEN: Now this club, the Apollo, at 6th and H, you said it was owned by whites, but obviously this must have been an integrated club, if you were able to go ...

FINLEY: In the very beginning it was segregated, because even the tournaments were segregated. The blacks could not go into what we call the Golden Gloves until something like 1947. '47 or '48.

FRANZEN: Even though nationally Joe Louis had broken this barrier and so forth?

FINLEY: But that was professional. There was a difference between professional and amateur. Then it depends on the city or the state that you're in. Now the Golden Gloves tournament is usually run by some type of organization like the Urban League and so forth or what have you, and they're the ones who sponsor it. But they had what we call the white tournaments and the black tournaments. The white did not go in through the tournaments here in the District.

FRANZEN: How was the training there? Was the training good, do you think? If you were not putting your body into the punch, I guess maybe the training was not as good as it should have been.

FINLEY: Well, I won't say ... I'm glad you asked that question, because obviously that would come up. I had to work. I come from what I call a poor family and my mother was a domestic worker, and there were

two sisters and myself and we had to have clothes and so forth, so I had to work—and I never minded working. So I didn't have time to what I call really to train. And you must be able to train, regardless of what it is or what you do. I won't say you have to be trained for it, but you have to have training for it. So the guys ... I didn't mean I didn't train any at all, but very infrequent. I didn't stay into the gym. And in order to box, it's scientific, or it's an art, and it comes like anything else. You have to practice, practice, practice. It's like golf or tennis or anything. You have to practice. It seems to be simple from a layman's standpoint of view to throw punches, but it's not as simple as that at all.

FRANZEN: Okay.

FINLEY: Oh yeah, you asked me something about the gym there. Well, when I first came in 1960 to 518 10th Street, we had what I call the upstairs. A lot of old motor parts and so forth were up there, so I cleaned them out and renovated upstairs, or had it done, the floor and what have you. And I set it up, not as a commercial place, because it's not really that big. But believe it or not, on some occasions we would manage to get anywhere from fifteen to twenty people there in the evening, and it got to be rather popular down through the years. We had Georgetown University Law School students to come there, and the reason I said Law School, is that somehow or another it started. A fellow who helped me with the club in the evening, training, because he liked boxing too, he was working as security at Georgetown University, and he in turn more or less started the ball rolling. And even when I closed up I had as many as twelve or fifteen students from Georgetown University over the years—and that was over a period of almost forty years—come in.

FRANZEN: Come in ...

FINLEY: Not the same ones, but you know the word kind of gets around, primarily from the Law School.

FRANZEN: Okay, now we're talking about Finley's Gym. By the way, in the phone book you were listed both as Finley's Gym and as Finley's Boxing Club. Were they one and the same?

FINLEY: They were one and the same.

FRANZEN: In this gym you had on the upper floor in that piece of the building toward the back, when did you start that boxing gym? Was it as soon as you started the garage?

FINLEY: As soon as I started the garage in 1960. For about the first year it was just more or less ... there was no advertisement on it at any time, but in the boxing community the word kind of gets around and you have other fellows turn in. I didn't turn them down and so forth. So it has really never in those forty-some odd years been set up on a commercial basis—because I didn't have to depend on it, for one thing. I

was working downstairs and making a pretty good living in the mechanical repair, so it wasn't such a burden at all.

FRANZEN: So a guy who wanted to come in and work out, spar and so forth, he didn't pay you anything?

FINLEY: Oh yes, he paid what we called a gym due or fee, or should I say a donation. He had to furnish all his own equipment. But boxing has the most close community than any sport. If a youngster will come in and come in regular—that doesn't mean he come in this week and you see him two weeks later, something like that—but if he comes in regular, the older fellows who are sitting around teaching would just simply gravitate to him, believe it or not.

FRANZEN: So there were people there besides yourself who were teaching and coaching these guys.

FINLEY: Oh yes.

FRANZEN: And who were they?

FINLEY: These were ex-boxers who's been around. Ex-boxers. Older fellows in their forties and fifties or what have you. And I can't help but express how close the boxing community is. Anyone who's been associated with boxing, I could practically say anyone, if he goes to a town or some place or what have you, if he has the time, the first thing he is going to look up will be another boxing club. As an example, in 1997 I had an uncle who lived in Detroit, and I always heard of Kronk's gym.

FRANZEN: Kronks?

FINLEY: Yeah, K-R-O-N-K—I think that's the way you spell it. A fellow, legendary, by the name of Emmanuel Stewart. He still trains fighters even today. What I'm really leading up to is I went over to just look at the gym. You know, you like to make comparisons to the way you're doing things, at least that was my idea. You could learn if this guy's got something I haven't.

FRANZEN: So what were the hours of your gym?

FINLEY: The hours in the beginning were something like from about eleven o'clock in the day to eight in the evening. But after I retired from downstairs—I retired twelve years ago, in 1989—and then I spent, shall I say, full time in the gym myself. But prior to that I always had an ex-boxer, an older fellow, who donated his time to kind of keep order, to keep things going, over all those other years, which is thirty-some odd years, and ... what was your original question?

FRANZEN: I was asking you about the hours.

FINLEY: Oh, yeah. In latter years, for about the last eight or nine years, I changed it to six o'clock in the morning, and that was mostly because we had a pocket of professional people come in—doctors, lawyers, Indian chiefs and otherwise, and they needed to get to work. So, in fact it was suggested to me indirectly, about opening up early, and I started opening up early. You get the people coming in early. They come in around six, and not later than seven, and it usually takes about two hours, to train and dress and so forth. We had showers there so they would get dressed and generally go to work. Now, not a lot of them—something like maybe fifteen altogether, over several years. And it worked out.

FRANZEN: We've been doing a lot of talking about race. What was the racial breakdown, typically, of your boxing club clientele? Were these ...

FINLEY: Well, believe it or not, when I left it was more white youngsters, not necessarily youngsters, than there were, shall I say, the black fellows, because I didn't cater to the young black fellows because they would not pay what I call gym dues or fees or wouldn't contribute. But the others, I didn't have any problem at all. So I didn't cater to them. I didn't chase them away, by any means, and the neighborhood youngsters, they were welcome to come in. And one of the most elated feelings for me is that the schools, the word kind of got about, and the teachers would have, what we call, what do they call this day where the kids go out ...?

FRANZEN: A field day?

FINLEY: Yeah, a field day. That's the word I was looking for. A field day. And we had any number of schools around to come in and see, and even it got to some of the institutions, like a fellow that used to train there, he was in charge of some patients at Saint Elizabeth's Hospital, and that's a great feeling. I love to do things for people. I love to do things for people. And he would bring them in, and some of them had never been in a gym or a boxing club before. And most of the time the fellows would be working out and they would get a chance to see it firsthand.

FRANZEN: So this was always a racially mixed situation in there.

FINLEY: Yes, very much so. Yeah, that was the original question. So actually when I closed I had a majority of white more so than I did of the black fellows, because I didn't cater to the boxing as such. I'm the only man in the world that owns a boxing club that did not have a financial interest in it. Because all boxing clubs, professional boxing clubs, are owned by managers or trainers or otherwise, someone who has some way of recouping his revenue that he's got into it. And the only reason I was able to stay there is because I had a garage downstairs, and it was kind of a feeder, plus I loved doing it. To me it was just a hobby, just a hobby and an avocation. But there was so many calls for it, and I did keep it clean and so forth, and I didn't have any problem when some of the others would come in. They'd see—they'd really

come in for an inspection, some of them would—they'd look around and if it's up to par. And I run a very strict ship. And when I say a strict ship, as far as some of the youngsters that come in, we didn't have what we call a lot of cursing or swearing or things of the sort like that. And a boxing club can get out of hand. It's the next thing to a pool room, you know the things that go on. But if you don't let it get started and so forth, and you get the name or the reputation for being strict ... I was so strict, till, you speak to me when you come up the steps. The way the gym was constructed, you came up some steps and the desk was right at the top of the steps, and you were required to speak as such. I think it kind of breaks the ice. Now I don't expect you to look for me if I'm back in my room or somewhere else in the gym. The gym was only so big. It's shaped like a barrack, an army barrack, about the size of a barrack. It's long on the rear half of it. You might want to take a look at it.

FRANZEN: I was in there once a number of years ago.

FINLEY: Oh you were?! Did you meet me, was I there then?

FRANZEN: I did, I did. I met you.

FINLEY: Do you remember?

FRANZEN: I did. I was looking for a film location at the time.

FINLEY: Oh, and since you mentioned filming, over the years, it's hardly a week, with a little bit of exaggeration, would pass that some filming crew or someone did not call me [to ask] if I would permit them to use the space, and that's how it got to be so popular, till the word kind of got around. Even people from out of town and from foreign countries and so forth would come there and make documentaries, little films, and you name it, we've been in it. Anything that happens in the boxing community. I don't know if you remember—you said you'd been around for twenty-some odd years in D.C. There was a very unusual incident where a fellow by the name of Reuben Bell got killed in Washington Hospital Center. Now who in the world ever gets killed in a hospital center, plus he was a boxer too. And we had all the local TV channels there at the same time and I was kind of cooperating with them from a publicity standpoint of view. So they were taking interviews and things of the sort, 'cause it's very unusual that somebody walk into a hospital and get killed. But he did.

FRANZEN: Just let me complete one thing. I asked you about hours. So you started opening early in the morning, about six o'clock in the morning, and how late did you go at night?

FINLEY: Eight. Well, in a boxing club, a fitness center, and I consider myself a liberal person, you didn't chase the person out at eight o'clock. But eight o'clock is the shooting closing time, and if a guy's working out and he didn't come in until seven and it usually takes about a couple of hours, we'd

accommodate him by staying. I didn't just close it. In fact in most cases there I'd give him the key and say "Well, you lock it up when you go out."

FRANZEN: Now, I remember you had the ring set up there. That was a regulation-size ring?

FINLEY: Not really. A regulation-size ring is usually square, but mine was a little bit longer. You wouldn't know it unless you looked at it close, but it was only something like about maybe fifteen-by-twelve, fifteen feet by twelve feet.

FRANZEN: And that was because of available space.

FINLEY: That's right, that's right.

FRANZEN: And then you had the heavy bags, and you had ...

FINLEY: That's right, and the dressing room and the shower room was in the rear. The space was so close, when you had to go to the dressing room or the shower room and even the toilet area, you had to go through, through the ring.

FRANZEN: Through the ring.

FINLEY: It wasn't elaborate. I used to love to tell people when they come in there, you will find this place is kept clean and so forth, or what have you, but it's not the Waldorf Astoria or the Hyatt Regency. They usually would get the point. I also started accepting women there in latter years. For a long time I didn't because I only had the one dressing room area, but things had got so liberal within the last few years. In fact, a lady on the phone suggested to me, she asked—and I'd get calls like that because I'd run the ad in the yellow pages, which really paid off because a lot of new people came through the yellow pages—and I told her I didn't accept women because we only had the one dressing room. And she said that's no problem, just like that. And I started, and as a result it worked out very well.

FRANZEN: So you had women coming in to box?

FINLEY: Not a whole lot. Most of them for physical ...

FRANZEN: Just to work out.

FINLEY: Yeah, just to work out. But we had a few come in for boxing.

FRANZEN: Because that is happening now. We now have women boxers.

FINLEY: I personally don't approve of it, but that's neither here nor there. I have to straddle a rail of a split fence in explaining that. I will not stand in a woman's way if she wants to box, but I will not endorse

it by any means. I just think a woman shouldn't be boxing. I'm from the old school and I just can't see it. [Laughs] And some of them out there are pretty good. And incidentally, Ali's daughter, she's good. She's not only living off her father's name, I don't want to put it like that, not only, but she can box, and a lot of times these celebrities are an off-shoot of their dad.

FRANZEN: So, the guys who would come in—it was mostly guys—the guys who would come in to use the gym, what percentage of them would you say actually got into the ring to spar with a partner, versus people who just came in to hit the bag and jump rope and so forth?

FINLEY: Well, I would say, a good eighty percent of them would come in, but it's a funny thing about a boxing program. You would come in with no intentions of boxing, and especially if you were young—and we had some people come in up in their sixties and so forth, and we had no age limit. If you wanted to come in and punch a bag that's perfectly alright. But to answer your question, anything you train for, believe it or not, you have a desire to do it or to test it out, and that's usually the way it goes. And we were kind of strict, at least I was. I'd tell them in the beginning: We don't have no knock 'em down, drag 'em out here. That means you're not going to get banged up and so forth and what have you, plus you have your headgear on and your groin protector and so forth, so it's pretty much regular. It can get pretty heated. Now this is for the fellows who ... not the professional boxers. I had a number of professionals come in. They go all out war, because usually they can take care of themselves. But if you come in and you feel like you want to box, and usually I try to put you in, or match you with some other fellow who has equal ability, because it tests you to see what progress you are making. But even if you do get in with a more experienced boxer, the community is like this: he's not going to let you bang him around, but through his experience he keeps the level here. If you move it up to here, well he goes up here. That simply means he's going to protect himself. That's human nature. The first law of nature is self-preservation. So he's not going to let you bang him around. That's you as a new fellow that comes in. And boxing is an art, it's a skill, it's a learned process and you just don't go in there ...

[END OF TAPE 1, SIDE 2]

[BEGIN TAPE 2]

FRANZEN: [It's still] Saturday, November 24th. You said that you sometimes stayed there at the gym ...

FINLEY: Oh yeah, over the years, over a period of over twenty years.

FRANZEN: So what kind of a setup did you have for living accommodations there?

FINLEY: I had a room about the size of this room here. Right in the back. You can't see it when you come up the steps. I had it built there back in the sixties. I just added a room onto the place. I had a kitchen, washing machine in the back, and so forth. I had all the facilities.

FRANZEN: So that was your home. You didn't have another place where you lived?

FINLEY: Other than here. My family lived here, but ... my wife was here. I have a wife and so forth, but I stayed over there mostly except for on the weekends.

FRANZEN: Really? And that was simply because you were working such long hours tending the gym?

FINLEY: Yeah, long hours. Plus, I'm a loner by nature. I love to read. I can sit down and read just the newspaper almost for eight hours a day. And I take the Washington Times, the New York Times, obviously the Post, and the Afro-American newspaper, which it has the black community news. And maybe to be a little braggadocious, there's hardly anything that goes on in the community, if it's written, that I don't know about or can't add to it. I just love it, and I got that grasp, that thirst for knowledge, due to the fact of my early background. I weren't smart enough to catch on, but I've got news for you: if you read and comprehend, and a lot of people says that this person can't read and so forth, or the athletes, some of them, especially in the black community, say "well, he can't read." Well, they don't mean he can't read words, but you have to read the subliminal things in between. There are very few things that are written that actually mean what they say or say what they mean. You have to learn to be able to figure out, and that comes through experience, at least it has for me. So I guess you might go so far as to say it's self-taught. And I can generally adapt myself to the environment. I like to say from kings to beggars. If you want to wallow in the mud with the pigs, I can get there with you. If you want to have tea with the King of England, the Queen of England, and stick your pinkie finger out, I can do that also.

FRANZEN: So you sat there at night and you'd read. What other things did you do for entertainment, or was it really boxing, pretty much boxing as your life?

FINLEY: Pretty much boxing. A boxing program. And I used to, as a youngster going way back, to exaggerate, and say that if I ever become a fugitive from justice, and wherever there's a big fight, just send the FBI to the door, because I would be coming in. Now this is long before we had television. We didn't have television in the forties and so forth for the bouts and what have you. That's a bit of an exaggeration, but the point is I love boxing. I love it. I love the boxing program so much, until that wherever there was a big major fight, I was going to it. I've even been out to Las Vegas, but that was more or less just for the pleasure. Because you've got TV now, and actually it's like a football game, you can sit in your living room and get just as much out of it as you can ...when I say out of it, it's what's

going on. In fact more so, because you've got the commentary in boxing, more so than going to the actual event.

FRANZEN: What was the first professional fight that you went to?

FINLEY: Oh, professional fight was at Griffith Stadium. Local fellow named B.B. Washington. He's still in the District. I see him quite regular now. And Aaron Perry at the old Griffith Stadium. Does that ring a bell for you?

FRANZEN: Uh-huh.

FINLEY: Oh, well, not in the 27 years it doesn't, but you've read about it.

FRANZEN: Yeah, I read about it.

FINLEY: Griffith Stadium, that was the first professional fight I saw. Now I was already training at the Apollo Athletic Club as well as the Liberty Athletic Club, and the reason I wound up at the Apollo Athletic Club is that they decided to integrate the amateur tournaments and there were only a selected few clubs that you could go in through. I was training at the Liberty Athletic Club down at 9th and D Street Northwest. That's downtown. Downtown wasn't like it is now by any means. In fact it was upstairs up over a restaurant. And only a few clubs that would be permitted to come in from an integrated standpoint of view, and I was assigned to the Apollo Athletic Club. In other words, I went there. Some of the fellows went to other clubs and so forth, but I was assigned to the Apollo. And I usually get along with people, I don't rock the boat, so we got along together very well.

FRANZEN: TV arrived, I guess, in the late forties, fifties, here. I remember when I was a kid, when we got TV, I remember there were Wednesday night fights and Friday night fights.

FINLEY: Friday night. Cavalcade of Sports with Don Dockery [spelling?].

FRANZEN: Right, sponsored by Gillette ...

FINLEY: Well, they came later to Thursday night, but the primary was the Friday night fights. That's when they had weekly fights.

FRANZEN: And that was national television, that was a major network. I don't remember which one it was, but the whole country was watching boxing. I remember watching it as a kid, following it a little bit. I remember when Cassius Clay, Muhammad Ali today, knocked out Sonny Liston. It was a huge event. It was a sensational thing. I remember when Ingomar Johanssen won the heavyweight title, that was a huge thing.

FINLEY: Against Floyd Patterson.

FRANZEN: Right. Boxing doesn't seem to be as big a part of the national culture today as it was then. Is that ...

FINLEY: Well only what we call the big fights. Boxing will never die. In fact I have to go so far as to say, as long as you've got two men on the face of the earth, one of them's going to challenge and the other's going to accept that challenge. Now that's just a metaphor that I'm using, or what have you, but you will always have some type of combat between men, just like we'll always have wars. I heard someone say once, I haven't read it in the Bible, there will be "wars and rumors of wars," and when I first heard that I just couldn't understand it because I thought in the Second World War is when we, shall I say, defeated the Germans, or that war was over, I put it to you like that. Intelligent people sit down and figure out a way for us not to have wars and keep killing because war is terrible. It's terrible. Even today you know people get bombed, women, children and so forth or what have you, so ... I don't know why I started on that part of it, but...

FRANZEN: Well we're going to get back to that, but before we do let's talk a little bit about some of the fighters who went through your club there on 10th Street. Who were some of the ... there were a number of major boxers who trained at that place.

FINLEY: One of the most what I call major—you'd have to be a boxing fan to probably know—but we had a fellow by the name of Bobby Foster. He was one of the greatest light heavyweights there was, in my opinion. He even would exceed Archie Moore. Archie Moore, his name is probably legendary with the boxing community ...

FRANZEN: I remember Archie Moore, I remember watching him ...

FINLEY: But one reason he got to be so popular is he was one of the first who fought up until he was in his forties. And boxing is like this—most any sport, boxing in particular—if you could box at forty it was unheard of for you to fight a main event, or be a boxer beyond 32 and 33, but now that's quite common. But to get back to what I'm really trying to explain is that the older men in their forties could identify with Archie Moore. What you're saying is: if he can do it, so can I. It might not be true or not, but that's the way, pop culture or otherwise, that's the way it works. But to answer your question, I started talking about Archie Moore because I thought this fellow Bobby Foster was ... and incidentally Foster, he was a light heavyweight, which means that he was one weight class under the heavyweights, but he'd run out of competition in the light heavies. And he was training at my place during this whole time.

FRANZEN: He was a local guy?

FINLEY: Well, he is from Albuquerque, New Mexico, but he was stationed at Bolling Air Force base, and one of the fellows that used to train at the gym there, a trainer rather, was a sergeant and he met Foster out there and he introduced him to the community here. So over the years a lot of people think to this day, especially in the black community, that he was a native here, because he stayed here during his entire career. But I talk to him now occasionally. He's a bailiff in a court. What's the duty of a bailiff? Kind of to keep order or something?

FRANZEN: Yeah, uh-huh.

FINLEY: So that was his start. So Bobby Foster is one, and we had another fellow by the name of Holly Nims [spelling?]. He was never a champion but he was very, very good. He was always the bridesmaid instead of being the bride. That simply means he fights the main event, or a big fight, and somehow or another he'd either get what we call robbed—put up a good fight but the decision didn't go to him, it went to the other guy. Those are two of the main ones, but over the years we've had a number of fellows to win what I call championships. And in 1968 we had a white fellow, Ronnie McGarvey [spelling?]. I usually go so far as to say white, I just usually ... what I'm explaining is we had a blue-eyed blond fellow that would have been from the Finley's Boxing Club in the '68 Olympics. The Olympics was in 1968 and he was from our club. He had worked his way ... there's kind of a stepping that you go, from your local to your regional and then your nationals and so forth, and he had three fellows to fight in the trials for the '68 Olympics. He won two of the fights and he lost to the third fellow. To put it another way, if he had won he would have been from Finley's. Now that's the closest we've gotten to the Olympics. No, what am I talking about. We had another fellow here this past Olympics ...

FRANZEN: First of all, what was that guy's name again?

FINLEY: Ronnie McGarvey.

FRANZEN: Ronnie McGarvey. Okay, I'm sorry, go ahead.

FINLEY: Another fellow named Clarence Vincent. He trained there at the club, and he did win a bronze medal. I almost kind of overlooked him. And the reason that is, a lot of people think, even in your...

FRANZEN: Vincent?

FINLEY: Yeah, Clarence Vincent. A lot of people think, and probably including you ... I only operated the gym. I was kind of like directing the ship. I was a very good director. I could tell you when, what and how to do. Just like when I was downstairs, I had as many as fifteen men working for me, but I never actually did the work itself, as far as being a mechanic. Sometimes people would come in and say "Well, Mr. Finley, your mechanics are tied up, can you just do this for me" or something or another. And I

wouldn't be sarcastic, but I asked them, I says "Have you ever seen me with a pair of pliers or a screwdriver in my hand?" And they'd think for a minute and they'd say "No." What I am, I'm a director. I consider myself a pretty good one. I can tell you what to do, how to do it and so forth. Not that I'm above doing it in any way. I said all that to say this: Even with the boxing club, I never actually trained, I never actually trained fellows. I was up there, shall I say, to keep order, to direct and to assign. And I like to consider myself a director more than anything else. And I love the boxing game, and I'm around it and I know quite a bit about it.

FRANZEN: So these other retired boxers would do most of the actual training and coaching.

FINLEY: Yes, shall I say, on a voluntary basis. There's such a comradeship in boxing, till any youngster can go into a club, a boxing club. And they got 'em in all the major cities, shall I say, for just ... [Knock on door. Tape paused for interruption by grandchild.]

FRANZEN: I'm sorry, let's continue. So the actual training of the boxers was done mostly by these other, older, retired boxers. Did you have an age limit? Would anybody be sent away because they were too young to come in and work out?

FINLEY: Yes, or either come back at a different time when the gym is closed. We'd have some people to come in, with mothers and fathers shall I say, as early as six and seven years old, and I'd have to ... I wouldn't take them in because it got to be a dignified baby-sitting club at one time. We had quite a few, and they'd drop 'em off and then you know, et cetera, et cetera. Plus, a kid will be a kid. They'd cause a disturbance and they'd start playing and kind of get in the way. So I had to kind of cut down on them, but I managed to make out one way or another. If they wanted to bring them in, if the dad or whoever wanted to bring the kid in, with the kid, and you be there, I did not turn you down. This is during what we call slow time. The gym was only, shall I say, busy when I opened up at six. We had, I guess, maybe ten or twelve people to come in from six o'clock in the morning until, say, nine, because most of them were professional people and they had to be at work at nine or ten. And then your professional boxers would start coming in around ten or eleven, and they would be there until about one. Now the gym would get very slack from about one o'clock until about five. Not completely, but we'd have two or three to come in. But then again, most of the people would be there, including the students, the law students from Georgetown. I keep mentioning that, because quite a few of them came there. And of all things, we had one of them who was a priest there. And a lot of publicity about him, because when the people would come to the gym and would want to write a story I'd always mention him, and I'd say, how often do you get someone who's going to pray over you in the morning and hit you on the jaw in the evening? I'm kidding, but...that's the way it worked out.

FRANZEN: There was an article in the Washington Post in August of this year, August 23rd. One of the fighters that was mentioned in there, one of the men who came and used your gym, was Sugar Ray Leonard.

FINLEY: Yes, he came in 1976. That was the year that he won the Olympics. Now, the boxing community works like this: I've always had what we call some of the tougher fellows, and so if the guys would come from one club to another ... now, we did not have the Sugar Ray Leonard's Gym at that time, you know what I mean?

FRANZEN: Yeah, he started his own gym.

FINLEY: Yeah, but he was training at another club called Palmer Park, a small independent club. So he would come over and work out or box with those fellows, to work out with the fellows there, to kind of test himself on a higher caliber of boxer, because I had some pretty good fellows who were there.

FRANZEN: So he trained there before going to the Olympics?

FINLEY: Yeah, uh-huh. Not exclusively, but he might come in one or two days this week and one or two days next week or what have you. He would train.

FRANZEN: Any other really big names that passed through there? Were there any other really big-name fighters?

FINLEY: Let me see ... No, not really, I can't think of 'em right off hand, other than Bobby Foster, I keep going back to him. That was this light heavyweight, and another fellow, Holly Mims, I mentioned him. But any number of other fellows down through the latter years ... I have no idea how much your knowledge is about boxing, but they started to splitting up the sanction groups. It used to be just two back in the forties. In other words, when you said you was the champion in your division, the interpretation for that to me simply meant I'm the best man in the world and I will challenge any man in my weight in the world—and I add an amendment to that: if the money is right, because there's a lot of negotiation in money and otherwise. I said that to say this: but now they've got divisions where a guy is fighting for a championship and he's won fifteen and he's lost fifteen. You know, that's not championship caliber, not at all.

FRANZEN: In that Washington Post article, a name that really jumped out to me, surprised me, was Miles Davis.

FINLEY: Oh, yes. That's something that musicians do. They come to the club. Not to box, they never box, just for taking exercise and hitting the bag. And when I say that's something they do, for exercise. They're blowing the horn and what have you ...

FRANZEN: So if Miles Davis was in town doing a gig, he'd come by Finley's to work out.

FINLEY: Absolutely, on more than one occasion. Back during the sixties and the seventies he used to come to a place called the Crystal Caverns and a couple of places in Georgetown. He would always come by. Sometimes he'd spend a week or ten days and he would come in every day to work out on the bag.

FRANZEN: Is that right?

FINLEY: I don't think I finished explaining too, mention rather, about people calling up to use the gym for film purpose and otherwise. Back in 1971, Burt Lancaster was there to use ... I can't think of the name of the film ... but anyway he was a star in the picture by Paramount. And the most recent one, we had Along Came a Spider, that was the name of a film by Paramount also. They came, and just to shoot certain segments. They needed a segment of boxing. And mostly film students. The word kind of gets around, and I'm liberal in doing it. I've even let them use it on the weekend, because we didn't train on ... only trained until about one o'clock on a Saturday. So if they want to come in ... and they would spend whole weekends there. And I love to do things for people, get a big delight. No charge or anything like that. And they would be there making films, studying their trade, if you follow me and know what I mean.

FRANZEN: Shooting boxing scenes. The Burt Lancaster film—was he playing a boxer in that film?

FINLEY: No, it was a clandestine film, and they wanted a Washington scene in a boxing club. So Burt Lancaster came up the steps, and a fellow, one of the boxers, was punching the bag and Burt Lancaster came over and pulled his trainer over to the side and spoke with him. That was the scene in the film.

FRANZEN: You don't remember the name of that film?

FINLEY: Oh, yes I do. Scorpio. Scorpio.

FRANZEN: Scorpio.

FINLEY: I've even seen it a number of times on TV since then. I didn't think too much of it, because it was a clandestine film, dealing with the CIA and so forth. And my looking at a film or picture or a film or story, I can follow it like this, but it jumps from here to here with no reference to this scene ...

FRANZEN: So it kind of jumped around in a choppy way? Okay. So that was back in the early seventies, you think. Scorpio. Alright, I'll look that one up. Well, let's talk a little bit about one other thing I wanted to get a better sense of. You were running this gym. That was a full-time thing, but you had this full-time garage going on at the same time. How did you manage to juggle both of those things?

FINLEY: Now, during the early part of that, I did not go upstairs until sometime in the evening, because sometimes in the garage I'm there as late as eight o'clock in the evening, and no particular time. When I

say no particular time, you work accordingly. You didn't just close up. The closing time was around eight, but we didn't just close the door. If we had a job to finish, we finished it, and I went upstairs afterwards. But prior to that I always had someone, shall I say, to keep order and to kind of keep things in line. And usually it's an older fellow that's an ex-boxer and so forth, and he loves to be around the boxing community. There are more volunteers in the boxing community than you would ever think of. There's no fee or anything. Once a fellow learns how to box and so forth or what have you, and it is a skill, an art, I keep mentioning that, he likes to, he gets a big thrill out of introducing it to a young fellow. A young fellow will come in that doesn't know how to hold his hands up, with a bit of exaggeration, or can't box, and after you teach or train him for a week or two, or what time, you see him shifting and dodging. Those are...that's why I never was able to throw with my weight a punch because—I'm not using it as an excuse—but I didn't stay in the gym. I had to work, during my early days, but I fought on endurance and, shall I say, courage—I'd always, you know, just come out and start throwing punches.

FRANZEN: At some point, you let go of the garage side of this. You sold the garage? How did that work?

FINLEY: I sold the garage twelve years ago, in 1989. Even though he kept the name—when I say he, the fellow, a Jewish fellow, Armand Brick [spelling?] I sold it to. He kept the name because it's a very good name. I was doing a very good business, but you get kind of tired or worn out after a certain period of time, and none of my sons showed any great interest in taking it over. So he bought the garage in 1989, and then I, shall I say, spent full-time in the gym, from '89 up until a couple of months ago, in fact August the 20th, to be exact.

FRANZEN: So you raised how many kids?

FINLEY: Six.

FRANZEN: Six kids. You have grandchildren now?

FINLEY: Yup, I have twelve grandchildren. And you can really get attached to them. I didn't spend a lot of time with my own kids because, if you noticed, I said I spent a lot of time in the garage and stayed upstairs and so forth. But you can really get attached to your grandkids, and I'd read and heard about things like that but I didn't think I'd become, for lack of a better word, a victim of it, but I love to be around the kids.

FRANZEN: Now, you had sons. Did any of them box?

FINLEY: No, none of them ever took an interest in boxing. No, they didn't follow up. I've always said it would have been the greatest in life if they had, but I've always said I would never ... I don't want to use

the word “force,” but I say force for the lack of a better word. I would introduce them to it, and if they wanted to keep it up or go on with it, fine. But as far as me saying, well, you’ve got to come down to the gym today and you’re gonna box, I don’t know if it was the wrong thing to do or not, but I just never felt like that. I wanted them to have an interest in it or to adapt to it, but none of them took a great interest.

FRANZEN: And you never pushed.

FINLEY: No.

FRANZEN: I think we’ve covered the gym pretty well here. I do want to ask you a little bit about how you see boxing. We’ve touched on this a little bit, and how things have changed. The sport has changed a lot in the time that you’ve been in contact with it.

FINLEY: It has, it has. In fact, down at the Apollo Athletic Club, this fellow who ran the club—when I say ran, as far as the boxing is concerned, named Mr. Glenn Drake—he said at that time (this was back in the forties) at one time it was going to be where you could have an audience in a telephone booth. He was exaggerating. What he meant was, in the forties, you couldn’t hardly see how expanded that the TV was going to be. So, actually, right now, there is more revenue that is turned over in boxing than there ever was, because you have what we call “big fights.” But it’s not like universal in the community like it was during, shall I say, the Joe Louis era and down through the forties. You have pockets, and that’s my word, of major fights. In fact you have fights every ... on the average about ...well, you have about three during the week. You have Friday night fights, and you have the Saturday fights. In fact, we had the heavyweight Lennox Lewis and Rockman [spelling?], from Baltimore, two weeks ago. But to answer your question, there’s more revenue that’s turned over in boxing than ever, than ever before, and I would like to think that it’s just as popular, in a different way, in a different way. That difference would be from a TV and a revenue standpoint of view, because boxing, at one time back during the forties, was the most popular of the major sports, over and above football. Baseball has always been America’s et cetera ...

FRANZEN: But boxing was huge. Even when I was a kid, boxing was a really big deal.

FINLEY: It was, and some colleges offered scholarships in boxing during the forties and what have you, during that era, but they dropped it. I don’t know of any colleges now that do. Now, they had listed in the paper this fellow that was training at my gym, Clarence Vincent, in the last Olympics, that he went to some school up in Michigan. They gave him some kind of scholarship but he had to fight under their name—even though he trained at my place.

FRANZEN: There are people I have heard that will argue that there's something bad about boxing. Yes, there are injuries in most every sport, but only in boxing is the goal of the sport to injure your opponent. What do you say to somebody like that?

FINLEY: First of all, I rationalize. I tell them they can fall up in the bathtub and get hurt, but there are many, many more injuries in football than there are in boxing. But you hit the key word. I'll word it a little bit different. Your idea is to go out in particular to maim a person. I don't know whether that's a proper word or not, it's to do damage to him, and when you do it, it actually magnifies itself. But boxing first of all is a lovely sport and it is a good sport. Now this is just my opinion, and I actually like boxing better than I do any of the other sports. I just think it's a wonderful sport, and it will never die out, you'll always have the two men ...

FRANZEN: And you say, the idea of women boxing disturbs you.

FINLEY: I wouldn't go so far as to say disturb, but I certainly wouldn't endorse it, by any means.

FRANZEN: Just because you feel it's not a woman's role, or are you worried about women injuring themselves, or what?

FINLEY: I just worry about it's not a woman's role, as you call it. Say ... for instance, she's got a breast. A man doesn't have one as such. Now, those are not supposed to be hit on, even though you've got protectors or cups there, but you've still got a certain amount ... I just don't think a woman's body is constructed for boxing, that's just my opinion.

FRANZEN: Is there anything that we've missed, anything else that we should talk about that we've not...

FINLEY: Let's see, we did talk about the gym ...

FRANZEN: One thing that we should talk about is your decision to close down the gym. You closed down the gym in August of this year, August 20th. Why did you decide to call it quits?

FINLEY: Well, first of all, it was not a commercial set-up. And the fellow that I sold the business to, I kept the mortgage on it, the papers on it, shall I say. And during 1989, when I sold it, the interest rates were ten percent and in the last few months or so it's dropped down to six percent, or very close to it. So to make a long story short, he had it refinanced. So when he had it refinanced he paid me off the balance, and when he paid me off the rent went up. But prior to that we had kind of a handshake situation, an agreement. Let me be more specific. There was occasions when he got as much two months behind, and I wouldn't press it. He paid me, to go along with it. But when he paid me off, the things changed. You're going to have to quote me exactly on all of what I'm saying now, because some people will

misunderstand, but the primary purpose was, or the true [unintelligible] was, that the rent doubled on me. I was paying six hundred dollars a month and he wanted, after he paid me, only after he paid me off, he wanted fifteen hundred dollars plus fifty percent of utilities, such as water, which means it went way up. And it was never set up on a commercial basis and I couldn't afford to pay it, even though I love it. I would be right there now if that had not happened.

FRANZEN: So you really left involuntarily.

FINLEY: In the black community we call it you scratch my back, and I scratch yours. And the reason they used the back term, because there's a certain part of your back where you can't scratch, or reach, even though you might itch there. Am I making sense to you? Well, I want you to scratch mine, but then after he paid me off, his and my relationship is like open and close the door.

FRANZEN: So you'd still be there if you could be.

FINLEY: Oh yes, very much so. Very much so. I just love it. In fact, someone asked the question—it may have been in that August the 23rd article—how long will you be here? And I said as long as I'm able to come up the steps. I kind of have to hop now, but that's from jogging. I've got the world's best record on jogging, and with all modesty, I have, what I call ran, we didn't call it jogging back during the forties and the fifties. I have run or jogged over three hundred days out of a year, and there's only 365 days. You could get addicted to jogging or running. What's that endorphin that comes out of your body, or something or other, and you feel like you can lift the world up in your hand or beat anybody, and I would really look forward to it every morning. Every morning, I'm out there, even to this day. I walk now, I still walk three miles a day.

FRANZEN: Yeah, it feels good.

FINLEY: It does. Obviously, you've done it. [Laughs]

FRANZEN: I still do. Well, thank you so much for participating in this ...

FINLEY: Well, sure. I hope I've been of some help to you.

FRANZEN: This has been a real pleasure.

FINLEY: Certainly.

END OF INTERVIEW