



THE RUTH ANN OVERBECK  
CAPITOL HILL HISTORY PROJECT

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**Interview with Maurine Phinisee**

**Interview Date:** April 23, 2012  
**Interviewer:** Paula Causey  
**Transcriber:** Paula Causey

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*This transcript was edited by interviewer Paula Causey to include additional material provided by the interviewee and material found through other research. Edits are presented in brackets.*

TAPE 1/SIDE 1

**CAUSEY:** This is an interview for the Overbeck Oral History Project with Mrs. Maurine Phinisee. I'm Paula Causey and we are at Mrs. Phinisee's home at 1825 Independence Avenue SE. And the date is April 23, 2012.

**PHINISEE:** Don't forget, it's Washington, DC.

**CAUSEY:** Washington, DC. You're right. So, Mrs. Phinisee, would you begin by telling us where you were born.

**PHINISEE:** Well, I was born May the 17<sup>th</sup>, 1920, in Chicago, Illinois. In St. Luke's Hospital on Michigan Avenue in the 1400 block. At 3 o'clock.

**CAUSEY:** And what was your family name, your maiden name?

**PHINISEE:** Evans. E-V-A-N-S.

**CAUSEY:** And had your family been in Chicago a long time?

**PHINISEE:** Not too long. I don't have the exact dates.

**CAUSEY:** And did you have brothers and sisters growing up?

**PHINISEE:** No, only me.

**CAUSEY:** And what were your parents doing? What was your father doing?

**PHINISEE:** My father worked and my mother wasn't working.

**CAUSEY:** You went to school in Chicago?

**PHINISEE:** In Chicago.

**CAUSEY:** Through what grades?

**PHINISEE:** Through junior college.

**CAUSEY:** Can you tell us anything more about your childhood in Chicago?

**PHINISEE:** Well, I grew up back in the day when kids weren't allowed to say a whole lot. They did what their parents said and they kept their mouth shut. So, I didn't do too much talking then. But, I like to draw and I was drawing on everything. We moved around a lot and I went to a whole lot of grade schools. And then, when I got to high school we sort of settled down. When I left home, we were still living where we moved to when I went to junior college; that's when I left home. [Mrs. Phinisee has a certificate that reads: Maurine Evans of the McCosh School has satisfactorily completed the Course of Study prescribed for the Grammar Department in Chicago Public Schools and is entitled to Admission to the High School Department, June 13, 1934.]

**CAUSEY:** And what year was that?

**PHINISEE:** Well, I left home in World War II. It was in 1942.

**CAUSEY:** And that's the first time you came to Washington?

**PHINISEE:** On April 11, 1942, I boarded the B&O Columbian train at 3:30 pm. It was scheduled to arrive in Washington, DC at 8:30 am on April 12. And that's when I got here. April 12, 1942.

**CAUSEY:** Was that your first train ride, or had you been on the train before?

**PHINISEE:** That was my first train ride. My first time away from home. I wasn't homesick. I was busy looking at everything that was going on.

[After the interview, Mrs. Phinisee provided written notes that include the correct dates for her travel to Washington: My first trip to Washington, DC was as a result of the inspirational postcard directed to clerically inclined girls to come to DC to aid in the war effort. This appeal came from Eleanor Roosevelt, wife of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, in regard to World War II which started when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, December 7, 1941. Having lived through the Depression and taken part in the program called NYA, "National Youth Association", I felt prepared to answer the call. So, on April 13, 1942, I boarded the Baltimore and Ohio "Columbian" train at 3:30 pm in Chicago, Illinois, and arrived in Washington, DC at 8:30 am, April 14, 1942 at Union Station.]

**CAUSEY:** Were you by yourself or someone traveled with you?

**PHINISEE:** Yeah, I was by myself. I came here because Eleanor Roosevelt, the wife of Franklin D. Roosevelt, sent out cards to people, girls, women, all over the United States to come and help the war effort in Washington. So, I became a government girl.

**CAUSEY:** And what did you do when you first got here?

**PHINISEE:** When I first got here, my mother told me to go to Travelers' Aid when I got to Union Station and they would help me find a place to stay. And, I saw the booth and I went up and told the woman I had just got there and I need a place to stay. She looked in her list and found me a room on ... up Georgia Avenue NW. On Harvard Street.

**CAUSEY:** So, Colombia Heights area, kind of?

**PHINISEE:** No, that was near ... down the street ... it was between U Street and Howard University.

**CAUSEY:** Howard University, OK.

**PHINISEE:** So I went to that address and the women showed me a room. It was a front bedroom, furnished, and I could use the kitchen if I wanted. And it was only \$6 a week.

**CAUSEY:** Wow.

**PHINISEE:** So, I took that. And I went back to the Station to get my bag, my suitcases. I had a set of luggage, I felt myself real grownup. [laughs]. So, I got my luggage and I brought it in and then I got hungry. I hadn't eaten breakfast. I ate on the train in the dining car. And, I slept in the coach. I didn't have a Pullman thing [ticket]. I just slept coach. So, I was hungry when I got to my room. So, I walked up ... they [the landlady] told me where Howard University was, so I started walking up Georgia Avenue and I saw this place that looked like I could get a hotdog. And that was the safest thing that I could think of. So I went in and got the hotdog and also I got my first lesson on segregation because it was a white organization. But, it was up the street from Howard, and the man told me that I could buy the hotdog, but I couldn't eat it there. So, I didn't argue with him. I just bought the hotdog and I brought it out and took it to my room and sat down and ate the hotdog. I had bought a soda or something. There was a little store on the corner of Seventh and Harvard so I got me a soda. And, ah, then I just settled in.

**CAUSEY:** Was there a family that owned the house and they were renting the room to you, or were there other boarders?

**PHINISEE:** Yeah, everybody was renting a room to somebody. That's why they had so many rooms in the travel agency. They had, I guess you would call it a pool, where all the people who had come in answer to that little postcard, that came ... they made ... there was a pool of people, of girls. And they would train them to do different things and they would go to different agencies. So, I was trained to do punch card work: IBM punch card and Remington. I had IBM and other people, some people had Remington. But, I learned how to do card punch. You had to know how to type and all that. So, if you

knew how to type, you could do card punch. But, when you hit the keys, you won't see no letters, you see holes, and the holes would correspond to whatever.

**CAUSEY:** So, you had had clerical training?

**PHINISEE:** Yeah, I had, oh, I went ... Franklin Roosevelt had a lot of different organizations to help from the Depression. So he had WPA, Work Project Administration [Works Progress Administration], and he had NYA, National Youth Association. They taught you how to do office work and that's how I learned about Pearl Harbor. Because I went in one morning to continue, you know, to train for the office work and everybody was crying and standing around the radio. Somebody had bombed Pearl Harbor.

But, what Mrs. Roosevelt wanted was somebody to work in any government agency. What I was going to do was punch cards for the soldier's allotment division. They were making \$21 a month. And that's what, it had their name and address and all that on this punch card. That was in IBM. After I learned that, then they sent me to over here on C Street, right in this neighborhood, C Street NE. They had temporary buildings. They had X, Y, and Z. And they had temporary buildings scattered all over the Washington area. But, I worked in Building X. I worked on the first floor where they had the IBM punch card machines. And they had a cafeteria in there and the colonels and all the officers and all, they were in there. They were building the Armory—the stadium came later—but they were building the Armory and they were building the Pentagon.

And 19<sup>th</sup> Street, I would catch the bus in the evening. The buses would go up 19<sup>th</sup> Street NE. I never came back [on] 19<sup>th</sup> Street [to] Southeast, but some people used to come out lunchtime and come down to the corner of Independence, which was then B Street SE. And they would buy cookies and stuff, whatever they wanted, you know, from the District Grocery Store, which was the orange and green sign "DGS". So, on that corner, which is now Independence and 19<sup>th</sup> Street SE, used to be a drug store, the DGS store, and a cleaners. And some apartment buildings used to be where the entrance to the Metro station, Stadium Armory Station, is now. But, I had never been up this street, so I didn't know anything that was going on up here. But, I came back to this neighborhood [laughs] years later.

**CAUSEY:** So, the temporary buildings where you were working on C Street, is that like over at the stadium where the parking area is now?

**PHINISEE:** Well, it's C Street. That would be the parking area for the stadium armory. I don't know when they tore them down. They had one on 12<sup>th</sup> and Constitution [NW], also, and I forgot what that building was, but it was a government building, temporary.

**CAUSEY:** Was it like Quonset huts?

**PHINISEE:** No, it was a two story, I don't know what it was made of, but it was a good building. Like I said, it was two stories and they also had on Oklahoma Avenue NE behind C Street, was a ... dormitories. They were temporary. One, I remember, was "Okinawa." They called them different things, different names according to the different Asian countries that they were going to. Like Iwo Jima, Okinawa, and stuff like that. I lived in one for about a couple of hours [laughs] because I saw some bugs in there and I didn't like that, so I left. Water bugs. And they've still got them over here. But, anyway ...

**CAUSEY:** So were you working for the Department of the Army, was it soldiers or sailors?

**PHINISEE:** Defense, Defense. The punch cards were going on the computer. They had big rooms with huge tapes, round tapes, of all the stuff that was on the punch cards. That was the computer thing. When you see the personal computers now and the laptops and the iPhones, they used to have rooms for the computers and people be carrying around these big round reels of tape. And I said, "Boy, I would like to know that, how to do that. "But, it was mostly men who did that. But, anyway, they had a nice cafeteria.

The buses used to pick us up in the evening and take us over to Benning Road and there we'd get the streetcar to go up Benning Road to Seventh Street NW and I would transfer and go up Seventh to Harvard Street. Or you could go wherever you want, you know. The boundary, if you took the streetcar from downtown, you'd go up Seventh Street. When you hit Florida Avenue, it would turn into Georgia Avenue, and then when you were on Florida Avenue, when you crossed Seventh Street, you would be going on U Street. So, I had to learn all that.

I used to stop to get breakfast in the morning at Seventh and—I have to think now—that would be Seventh and U. I would get the streetcar from Harvard Street down to U Street, which had just become U Street after it crossed Florida. And, I would go in there and get a western omelet for breakfast and I wasn't drinking coffee then—I don't know what I drank, milk or something—and that would be my regular breakfast. I'd get the same thing every morning. And one morning, I ordered my breakfast, ate it and went to pay the man and I didn't have my pocketbook. My change purse. But, he told me, pay him the next day. So I had, the next day I paid him.

**CAUSEY:** You don't find that very often these days.

**PHINISEE:** Uh-uh. And our pay was \$1400 a year.

**CAUSEY:** And paying \$6 a week, you said, for your room. How long did you stay at Harvard Street? Did you stay there through the war?

**PHINISEE:** I stayed there until I got married and went to Pittsburgh.

[After the interview, Mrs. Phinisee provided written notes regarding World War II in Washington: Army barracks were placed in different parts of the city. One location was the site that is now used as a RFK Stadium parking lot (C Street NE). The buildings were named X, Y, or Z where soldiers' allotment checks were card punched. Also, along Oklahoma Avenue NE there were more army barracks that were houses for "government girls." They were named after islands in the Pacific – Guam, Okinawa, etc. Another location for the barracks was on Constitution Avenue and 12<sup>th</sup> Street NW where the Defense Department had offices. An apartment building at 23<sup>rd</sup> Street NW was used as a training building for future IBM and Remington-Rand card punchers. I was trained on the IBM card system. One evening after leaving work we took the bus to Benning Road and transferred to a streetcar that looked strange. More passenger seats were added by installing a kind of "seat" between two seats. A person was not sitting or standing normally, but it was a case of half sitting and half standing, allowing for two more passengers. It wasn't tiring for the whole trip. What a clever idea.]

**CAUSEY:** Aha, how did you meet Mr. Phinisee?

**PHINISEE:** I met him up on U Street, but anyway ... now you cut, you went into my train of thought ...

**CAUSEY:** You were talking about living at Harvard Street, how long you stayed there.

**PHINISEE:** Why, that's when you broke my train of thought. I hadn't been, I wasn't talking about how long I lived there, I was talking about what happened. But, anyway, I went to ... as I told you before, in the beginning, they had this pool of women and I met a lot of people who became my friends. There was a place called the Leisure Lodge. Fourteen hundred block of U Street NW. Next to the Booker T. Theater, across the alley from the Booker T. Theater. It was a corner building. And they called it the Leisure Lodge. And that's where the black soldiers went. That was their USO. The white USO was at 11<sup>th</sup> and Pennsylvania Avenue NW. But they didn't go there; they went to Leisure Lodge. They had food and recreation there. And I still haven't found out ... it was run by the Pollyanna Club.

[The City Directory for 1943 lists the United Service Organization of A. Lichtman Theatres located at 1439 U Street NW. Abraham "Abe" Lichtman was the leading owner of African American movie theaters in Washington. Multiple Washington Post newspaper accounts from 1943 show activities under "Negro Entertainment Today" at the Leisure Lodge at the same address. The editor has not found a 1940s reference to the Pollyanna Club, although one existed in Washington in the 1920s that performed musical reviews.]

[Interrupted by telephone]

**CAUSEY:** You want to take that? We'll pause ...

We're back after the interruption. OK.

**PHINISEE:** So where was I, what was I saying?

**CAUSEY:** The Leisure Lodge, the USO for blacks.

**PHINISEE:** Oh, I want to find out about the Pollyanna Club. Lichtman. I got a copy of the Legionnaire Stationary, it has a letter written on it, but I'm going to block that out and just leave the top part of the letterhead. But, I would like to know who the Pollyanna Club is; nobody could tell me who they were. They've got a Washingtoniana Room at the Library, and I figured that's where I can find out about them, because they're supposed to know everything that happened in Washington. But, anyway, that's where I met my husband, my future husband. Because, I used to go there every Sunday after church. I'd go up to Leisure Lodge and you could play games, eat, or whatever. I would go there to eat. They would have potato salad and all kinds of good stuff. And I saw this guy sitting in a corner. Everybody else was milling around, he was just sitting in a corner. [Interrupted by telephone] Anyway, I asked him [telephone ring] Oh, no.

**CAUSEY:** OK, we're back. So, Mr. Phinisee is sitting quietly in the corner.

**PHINISEE:** He was sitting in the corner and I said, "Hi, soldier, what's wrong?" And I forget what he said and what I said, but anyway, I left him sitting there. Me and my girlfriend left and walked up U Street to what everybody is bragging about, talking about. The President went there. Bill Cosby went there. They're talking about The Chili Bowl. But me and my girlfriend walked up the street to that same place, I don't know what it was called, but we got two chili dogs. And I know the booth I was sitting in right as you go in the door, and it's still there. And these people act like they started "chili dog", but that was going on before, they had to buy it from somebody. And every time I hear about it, I get mad. I said, they don't know, heck, what's going on because it wasn't—I don't know nothing about Chili Bowl, but I know they had good chili dogs. Anyway, we went our way up there and I happened to look back and there he was following us. So, we continued on. I went on in there and sat down. He came in and sat down across from us and we start talking. That was it.

**CAUSEY:** And he was in the army?

**PHINISEE:** Yeah, he was in Ft. Belvoir in the cavalry. He was at Leisure Lodge. He went there a lot, too. Well, that was the only place they had to go. Another place—oh, there are so many things back and forth; I don't want to miss nothing. Another place that, ah, the Phyllis Wheatley YWCA on Ninth and—what is that?—Ninth and Rhode Island, Ninth and Rhode Island, Ninth and New York, or whatever. [901 Rhode Island Avenue NW]. They had buses to go, buses full of girls, to go to Ft. Belvoir for dances and

stuff like that. But, I didn't ever see him on that. He was in another part, but I went to these dances and I felt I was a wallflower, just like I was when I was going to school. So, I just let that ... I wasn't worried about that. But, anyway, that's one of my escapades. But, it was an AB&W, red and black bus, little fat little bus, that went out there, and it was sent daily. Because, you could catch it in front of the Old Post Office, 12<sup>th</sup> Street, and I would take it when I went out to see him, but I had to sit in the back of the bus. But there was a white lady, we used to see each other. And, we'd sit down together and talk in the front of the bus. The man never tried to run anybody off. I forget where she was going, but anyway, she would get off before I did. But, it was out in Virginia, Ft. Belvoir. So, they had segregation in Chicago, but I didn't run into it, because when I went to school it was like a United Nations. There were Germans, English, any kind of language you want. Japanese, Jewish, Chinese, you name it. I went to school with everybody. I lived in a black neighborhood, but went to the schools where different kids, you know ... the people who had stores, cleaners, and laundries and all that, different nationalities. Their kids went to school with me.

**CAUSEY:** Elementary and high school?

**PHINISEE:** Elementary and high school, yeah, high school. It was—and when I was in the—see, I'm going back now. When I was in high school, I took violin lessons. Two dollars, each time. I've still got the book. And after I learned the violin, I joined the orchestra. So, I played [second violin] with the orchestra in high school and in the sewing class we made our orchestra uniforms. Little gold and brown, had brown skirt with gold top, we made the uniforms. And for cooking class, for cooking, in the sewing class we made aprons and dishtowels, hooked towels with designs in them, that was for sewing. But, we used them in the cooking class. And we used to cook different things. We had industrial cooking, which meant cooked ...

END OF TAPE 1/SIDE 1

TAPE 1/SIDE 2

**CAUSEY:** We're recording again on the second side of the tape; yep, we're good to go.

**PHINISEE:** OK, my mother picked out all the schools. So she picked out Lucy Flower High School, which was the technical school for girls. They taught vocation, sewing, cooking, in other words, home economics. So I learned how to sew. She knew how to sew, so I just carried on, but I would make blouses and skirts, dresses, coats, and hats. I've got pictures of me in two of my coats that I made and, like I said, for orchestra we made our own uniforms in the sewing class and for the cooking class, in the sewing class we made the aprons and stuff. And then we cooked that giant school lunch one day. That was one

assignment. I remember that. This great big mixer and stuff, it looked like you were a doll compared to the size of the cooking utensils. But, anyway, nobody died. [laughs]



**Maurine Evans 1940 graduation photo**

**CAUSEY:** That's difficult to cook for that many people and still have it be tasty.

**PHINISEE:** And that's where I learned ceramics. I've got a kiln downstairs and all my glazes and all that. I can still do ceramics. I can't pour any molds because they are too heavy. But I can use the kiln.

**CAUSEY:** Ceramics means to make what kind of things?

**PHINISEE:** See the bears? [Mrs. Phinisee points to painted ceramic bear cookie jars on the shelf behind her.] And the giraffe.

**CAUSEY:** Ah, it's beautiful, tall giraffes.

**PHINISEE:** Anything up there. And my son did this, a little ceramics, too. And he does—I have two kids by the way, two men. They're senior citizens now, both of them. There is something wrong with them. One of them, the oldest one has Parkinson's. And the other one, I don't know what happened to him, but he needs physical therapy.

**CAUSEY:** Let's—do go back though, because we haven't got you married yet. So, when did you ...

**PHINISEE:** Oh, I got married April—no, not April—August 15, 1943.

**CAUSEY:** So, the war is still on. Married here in Washington?

**PHINISEE:** Yeah, St. Augustine Catholic Church. And that's strange, because when I came back—I came to Washington three times; this is my third time. When I came back to Washington for the last time, I went walking up 15<sup>th</sup> Street to find the church. No church. I thought I was going nuts. I said, there's got to be a church, I got married right here! The Washington Post tore the church down, bought the church, tore it down and built Washington Post. So that's where I was married, on Washington Post land! [laughs] Anyway, that's what happened to the church. They moved the church to ... up Northwest. But that was St. Augustine Catholic Church. I didn't have any—it wasn't a big wedding because it was the wartime—I didn't have any guests. One woman invited herself from the office. I looked around, she was sitting there in the pew. The only person. But, anyway ... [St. Augustine's Catholic Church at 15<sup>th</sup> and M Street was sold in 1946 and is now located at 15<sup>th</sup> and V Streets NW.]

**CAUSEY:** Did your family come from Chicago?

**PHINISEE:** No, they didn't know nothing about it.

**CAUSEY:** Aha.

**PHINISEE:** I told them about it. My nosy landlady on Harvard Street, she was really busy telling my mother a whole lot of stuff. I didn't have to tell her anything. But, anyway ...

See, I wrote a letter one time and while I was writing it, it had slipped down in the sheets. And she was making up my bed, she didn't have to, but found my letter and I was talking about her in my letter [laughs] to my mother. So I said no better for her, she didn't have no business reading my mail [laughs]. So much for her. She worked in an airplane factory, or whatever. She was doing the war effort, too. And her husband had a dance place on Seventh Street, just before you crossed Seventh Street. People used to go there, I don't know whether they learned to dance or just went to dance. That was his business. I mean, you know, his employment. And she was with the war effort, so she worked; she wasn't home a lot because she was working.

**CAUSEY:** And, then you indicated, you said, you went to Pittsburgh. That was after the war?

**PHINISEE:** Yeah, well my husband, he was discharged and he went to Pittsburgh and learned how to weld. He worked for Dravo Corporation.

**CAUSEY:** Dravo?

**PHINISEE:** D-R-A-V-O, a corporation on Neville Island, doing LSTs, LSTs for the military. So, I, well I wanted to go to Pittsburgh because I was pregnant and I didn't want my kid to be born in a district. I wanted him to be born in a state. So, we went to Pennsylvania. And we stayed there about seven years. And during one of those seven years, I came back to DC because of financial problems, unemployment. Because he worked for Dravo, and then he worked for Pressed Steel Car Company, for coal cars for the railroad. And, I wasn't working. But, he used to go around and wash walls. Being unemployed, he would carry this pail and box of "Spic and Span" and a thing and he'd go around and wash peoples' walls. And, that's how he'd make money, but it wasn't enough. So I came back here. Every time I would come back, I would get a job and I worked—I don't know whether it was the CIA or what, but it was something secret. I worked at night, from twelve to eight. I don't know whether it was ... [Lee Highway or] one of those boulevards going up into Virginia. It was a defense thing, it was about the war. And I always said that I was the cause of the end of the war because every morning at six o'clock, I'd be punching cards, but I'd be asleep, dead asleep. Still punching. And then I'd wake up in time to get ready to go home. I don't know what I punched or what happened, but the war was over. [laughs] I always wonder why somebody didn't catch me doing that, but I was really asleep. It was just like clockwork, six o'clock, I'm asleep. Seven o'clock, I'm up waiting to go home.

Anyway, I had me some—I didn't like the places I was living—but, anyway I ended up going back to Pittsburgh.

[Mrs. Phinisee provided a page of her notes about Pittsburgh in the 1944-50 timeframe. There were 712 staircases, 446 bridges, and 88 neighborhoods. Carson Street leads to McKee's Rock and features the Duquesne Incline. This is a car that goes up the side of a mountain to get to the street above. The neighborhood is called Squirrel Hill. At that time, the Western Penitentiary was in downtown Pittsburgh. Every night at 8:40 pm they would blow a whistle if everyone was in for the night. A major department store was Joseph Horne. Steel mills were operating, including Jones and Loughlin, which was later sold to a Texas firm in 1980, and Clairton. The Allegheny Passage creates a 320-mile long trail connecting Pittsburgh to Washington, DC. The Federal Enamel Company had a big sign in red, blue, black, and green; it used to light up the sky. After it was sold, the sky was dark. There was also a big sign of a cowboy smoking a Camel cigarette with smoke rings that rose up and a Pabst Blue Ribbon or Budweiser sign that showed beer pouring. You could see that as you neared the train tunnel going in or out of Pittsburgh.]

**PHINISEE:** And then, what happened? Well, my dad died in 1950 and, who else died? Anyway, I spent a few times there, but in 1950 I came back to DC and got myself another job and I stayed in that. I worked in the government and I worked for Freedman's Hospital. I was a ward clerk. Now it's Howard University Hospital. And then, my husband worked at Navy Yard, welding. Then he worked for

Hechinger's, putting up iron work and he started doing that on his own. So, he opened up Tri-Way Service, T-R-I-Way Service, ornamental iron works. I made the sign. I quit my government job and I went to work for Tri-Way Service. And one of our sons, he came in with us; he didn't stay too long. But that was in 1967.

**CAUSEY:** And it was located down on First Street?

**PHINISEE:** 1000 First Street SE. First and K Streets SE. It's now finally torn down. I've got pictures of it. The Village, [Capitol Hill Village], one of the Village volunteers took me up there when they were tearing down and building up the Nationals ballpark and all that, and high-rises all around. But that block was still there from K to L Street. So the building was still there, and on the other end, 1000, on the other end on L Street, First and L, there used to be a railroad track going down where the ballpark is now. And that's where Market Deli [was]; I used to go to eat breakfast, or pick breakfast up and take it back to the shop. And I would teach men how to weld, the ones who didn't know. My husband gave me a 15-minute lesson and I was welding. I welded, well, I welded that lamp thing up there and the chandelier ...

**CAUSEY:** Wow, that is beautiful, very intricate wrought iron.

**PHINISEE:** And I also welded that frame around that mirror, and I also welded—I got a ceramic checkerboard for chessmen and I've got the chess set in the boxes—the wrought iron base for the checkerboard. And my nephews did these scrolls for these shelves and they put the shelves up. They still lived in Pittsburgh, but they came to help me out after my husband died. He died in 1969.

**CAUSEY:** When you opened the Service, Tri-Way, were you living at the shop, or where were you living at that time?

**PHINISEE:** Here.

**CAUSEY:** Already on Independence Avenue?

**PHINISEE:** Yeah, because we had bought this house in 1952. I was living on 15th Street when I came here, renting, and then when he came, he brought—I brought the oldest kid and put him in school—and he brought the youngest kid with him, because the youngest one stayed in Pittsburgh with him. And when we all got together, then we bought this house. And I've been here ever since.

**CAUSEY:** So, you had a bit of a commute from here to the shop.

**PHINISEE:** The shop was 1000 First Street SE and this is 18<sup>th</sup> and Independence, not that much of a commute! Right over here, First and K.

**CAUSEY:** You'd take the bus?

**PHINISEE:** Well, he had a car.

**CAUSEY:** And that was before the freeway?

**PHINISEE:** No, all that was going on at the same time, around that time. The Star Building, the Evening Star Building over there, the guy used to work there, he lived up the street and I used to take him to work sometimes. His wife got jealous. I wasn't—I didn't have nothing in mind. [laughs] I just took him because he was going my way, but you know how some folks are.

So, I did the ceramics. The reason I brought that back up, because I happened to go back to my high school and look for something that I did that was in the showcase in the lobby. But, my cookie jar wasn't there. So when I came back here, I saw where I could take ceramics in Georgetown, so I went over there at night. I made a couple of things. And then I started really going to town with the molds and the slip, and dunking, and Paradigm kilns and all that. So, I was working here and teaching kids. I had a clay club. Then I started with grownups and I taught them. So everybody keeps asking me, are you a teacher? And then I think back, I guess I am, because I taught the men how to do the welding. I taught people how to make ceramics. I didn't teach anybody how to make stuffed toys, I didn't get that far. [Mrs. Phinisee told the editor earlier about making stuffed bears in outfits and other cloth toys; she showed the editor her business card with her name and address and a drawing of a brown bear holding a sign saying "Bear with Me."]

**CAUSEY:** So when you were teaching the kids, you were doing it here, in the basement. That's your studio, your work area?

**PHINISEE:** Yeah. I've still got the set-up down there. Got all the molds. I guess I should sell them. I doubt—there used to be that many pages [Gesturing to show several inches] of ceramic stuff in the phone book; now there's hardly a space like that. [Gesturing with fingers close together] I don't know where everybody went, because I would like to find out something about the kilns, but you don't even see that.

**CAUSEY:** Most people seem to be working now in something called resin when they're molding things and not so much pottery or ceramics any more.

**PHINISEE:** Well, they had that then where you had, ah, they would pour the stuff and then you paint it. But that wasn't ceramics. Ceramics was something that you made out of clay. Put it in the kiln and baked it. So it's there forever, unless you broke it.

**CAUSEY:** Did you sell?

**PHINISEE:** Did I what?

**CAUSEY:** Did you sell the things that you were making?

**PHINISEE:** Sell? Well, I sold, I set up sort of a shop in the ironworks. Had the shelves and I sold glazes and I did firing. I brought the stuff home and fired it in the kiln and took it back. Stuff like that. And, when he died, I kept the business for eight years.

**CAUSEY:** The welding business?

**PHINISEE:** Uh-huh. Things started getting dicey out here, and I said I don't like the way things are looking, and I quit and I sold stuff off. I didn't sell it blanket, I sold like a machine here and this and that and the other. Sold the trucks. I had a—the Thanksgiving after he died, one of the workers, somebody, left the back door of the shop so that they could get back in, and they stole the truck that had a hoist on it. And, the guy that was helping with estimating, we were driving all over trying to find the truck. We were over in Northeast, off of Florida Avenue, somewhere in the warehouse district. [Sirens in background.] They had put the truck at a loading dock, way back in there. If you were just passing there, you wouldn't see it. And I said, "Hey, there's the truck." So, he drove the truck back to the shop and fixed it, locked up everything. I know they were surprised, see, because my nephews had come from Pittsburgh to help me after my husband died, and they went home for Thanksgiving. So, that's when they did that. They didn't close the back of the shop door, that other worker did that. But I know they were surprised when they got back to find the other truck was still there, because we had two trucks. The other truck was back. Anyway, that's when I started breaking up everything.

**CAUSEY:** The neighborhood was changing down there as well.

**PHINISEE:** People were changing, because I would call ... a woman called me. I would go out and take estimates. She wanted something done. I went there. She opened the door. "I didn't call you." She was looking for a man. So I said, "Well, I wouldn't be here if you didn't call me, because I sure don't know you." Bam, closed the door in my face. So I said, I don't need this. So things just started changing around. Then people started rioting. We used to make window guards, door guards. Pretty soon we had to make roof guards because they were coming through the roof. We put a window guard, a door guard on. Before we could get the truck back to the shop, they had torn the brick out, took the door and everything. SO, and one time, I was driving down the street, wasn't looking for nobody. I was driving up Benning Road. No, Florida Avenue. And, out of the corner of my eye I saw my truck. I said, they're not supposed to be ... that truck is not supposed to be there; they're supposed to be somewhere else working. They're over there, got a job, just welding away. Doesn't even know I'm standing there looking at him. [laughs] He's

just welding away, smoke just going. I said, “What are you doing?” He pulled the hood up. “Oh.” And the man came out. They’re welding on this man’s car. I said, “They’re not supposed to be doing this. They’re supposed to be working for me on another job.” So I pulled them off. I don’t know what they left to be done, but they didn’t finish.

**CAUSEY:** We used to call that moonlighting; doing a little work on the side.

**PHINISEE:** Yeah, whatever they called it, they didn’t do that anymore.

**CAUSEY:** Did you find it difficult being a business woman, like dealing with banks or ...

**PHINISEE:** No, I bought my first car after my husband died. Brand new, \$3,000 some dollars. Imagine that! Now the tax is \$3,000. [laughs] I kept her, I called her Betsy. I kept Betsy until she was a teenager, then I sold her, and I was glad I sold her because I didn’t have no more worries, no more insurance, gas, maintenance, nothing. If I wanted to go out I went, but I didn’t have to worry about nothing. Now, I’ve got volunteers from the Village [Capitol Hill Village].

**CAUSEY:** Talk about this neighborhood a little bit and how it changed, like after the stadium was built or Metro.

**PHINISEE:** I used to go down to the Metro—they still have them. They have a board meeting every Thursday. I used to go to the board meetings because I was, I wrote myself in as an Advisory Neighborhood Commissioner.

**CAUSEY:** Oh, good for you.

**PHINISEE:** So, I was on the ballot. I didn’t campaign. I wasn’t, you know, all that debating stuff, I just got the needed signatures and I ended up on the ballot and they voted for me. I took it on myself to go to the board meetings to find out just what was going on on this corner. What Metro was going to tear down and all, so I went to those meetings. I brought the information back to the people. That’s what I thought was the Advisory Neighborhood Commission (ANC), you know, to help the people. But, then it got political. I didn’t like that, so I just walked away one night, because I was sitting next to this man and I was just casually looking up and down the table and he did like that [Mrs. Phinisee puts her hand out as if to cover something.] I don’t know what he was doing or what he was covering up and I didn’t care, so I said I don’t know what he thinks, but if he thinks I’m trying to, just like a little kid, you know, you going to copy my paper. So, I said, I don’t need this, so I walked away. I’ve never been back since.

[From Mrs. Phinisee’s written notes related to the ANC and other professional activities: I was a member of the Advisory Neighborhood Commission and remember around 1972 when I had a “continental

breakfast” in the METRO subway tunnel as it was being built near Judiciary Square. I also attended events sponsored by the Washington Area Contractors Association (WACO) and an annual event in September sponsored by the Congressional Black Caucus. In early days it was fancy lunches in the Dining Room with filet mignon and all the trimmings. At one dinner, the guest speaker was Congresswoman Barbara Jordan; the cost was \$100 per plate. The last event featured bologna sandwiches to make a point about the economy and poverty.]

**CAUSEY:** Do you remember what year it was you were elected?

**PHINISEE:** It was in the 1970s. Whatever. I was into politics, but not—because when Carter was elected and they were counting votes, I was up on Connecticut Avenue where they were counting the votes and that’s where the guy who plays the piano, stands up and plays the piano and talks and got the red, white and blue, Mark somebody. [Mark Russell]

**CAUSEY:** Oh, I can’t remember his name, but I know who you are talked about.

**PHINISEE:** Yeah, he was there at the International Inn. They keep changing the name of that hotel. He was there. I went up there and I had a red, white, and blue print dress. I don’t know where that dress went. But, anyway, I was really into politics then. That’s what I called it.

**CAUSEY:** Were you here in 1963 and the March on Washington? [Mrs. Phinisee was in Washington in 1963, but did not participate in the March.]

END of TAPE 1/SIDE 2

TAPE 2/SIDE 1

[Tape starts with a long blank portion]

**CAUSEY:** We’ve just started Tape 2, Side 1, and Mrs. Phinisee was saying she was here during the riots of 1968, but they didn’t interfere with the shop.

**PHINISEE:** No, the corner of New Jersey and K [Street SE] used to be a liquor store called Luber Liquors. A group they called winos would hang out in front of the liquor store. But, they were very respectful of me and they were protective of me. If anything was going on, they let me know. “Mrs. Phinisee, so and so, Mrs. Phinisee, so and so.” But, after I left and when somebody died, when one of them died, they would all dress up with suits on and go to the wake. So, when somebody died, that’s what they would do. But somebody said that there was a fire at Luber Liquors and then I heard they were doing

this restoration, renovation, or whatever they did down there. And Lank Woodwork was across the street from us. I don't know if you've ever heard of Lank Woodwork? It's two brothers.

**CAUSEY:** Lank?

**PHINISEE:** Lank, L-A-N-K. They were across the street and they had a lumberyard and they would make expensive—they used expensive wood to make stuff, like Supreme Court benches and, you know, the counsel thing they have, you know the long thing. And then, they'd make small stuff and we did a—they never had us doing anything for them. But we did some, I did some, pretty big jobs myself. The Martin Luther King Library. The rails outside, just plain bars. They were one inch solid bars and we had to drill a hole—I've got one of the poles sitting up over there—in the granite sidewalk. Had to drill that hole and set the bar, posts, and then weld the bar across and finish the rails. I never did understand why they didn't have some kind of support besides just that one post with the bar on top. But, it's still standing. So, we did that.

And I did what you call a pan stair. It's an iron pan, shaped like a stair thing, but it's hollow. After you weld it to the sides and all the way up, however high you're going, then you pour cement in the pan. So if you see an iron step with a lip on it and then you see cement all the way back to the riser, then it's called a pan step. So, I did that at Third and Rittenhouse NW, it was a school, a Jewish School. I always wondered, could I go back there to see. I guess it's still there because I haven't heard of anybody falling down [laughs]. We did that, and I did Martin Luther King thing, and I did a couple of Embassies.

And I did something at St. Elizabeth's and that's a scary place. I felt like I was scared to go through the gate because I didn't know whether they'd think I was one of the people and keep me there or what! [laughs]. Anyway, it ended up crazy because I had signed a contract and everything and had a "supposed" architect to do the drawings. Drawings looked fine. Everything was fine. I got the material cut and ordered and everything. [Unintelligible] They were up on Bladensburg Road. They had the—you see those tanks, orange and green, gas tanks, oxygen, acetylene, oxygen and all that. They used to deliver that to the shop. Acetylene is not welding, it's braising, but a lot of people said welding, but it's not. Anyway, they had, I had ... and we got all these supplies from different people, and I guess they are all either dead or moved way out into the suburbs, but it used to be like a family. You call, "Hey Fred, how about sending me some bars and squares, I need some squares, I need some round bars." "OK." "I need some welding wire." Stuff like that, you know. It was just a nice ... [Mrs. Phinisee later noted that Fred Branch had a welding shop near Franklin Street and he could cut heavier bars than her shop; he helped on the St. Elizabeth's job.]

You asked me about having problems, I didn't have any problems. The only problem I had was when they started going crazy. And I liked what I was doing. You've heard of Syphax?

**CAUSEY:** Syphax?

**PHINISEE:** S-Y-P-H-A-X. A builder in Virginia. The family is P ... I don't know how to spell it, but it's P-H-A-X. I guess it's Syphax, Syphax Builders. He's gone, I guess his wife is gone, I think. I don't know whether his sons run it or not. But I met him through Pete Brown, who used to be with Metro, who I met at the board meeting. And he turned me on to a lot of business, too. So, it was like a network. I don't know what you called it then, but that's what you call a network.

**CAUSEY:** It certainly is a city where there is so much ironwork, with the decorative fences and ...

**PHINISEE:** Yeah, but you're talking about the neighborhood, I told you about the little stores there. The corner up on 15<sup>th</sup> Street, who'd that used to be? That was another grocery store and they had a little department store and a bakery on 15<sup>th</sup> Street. Like if you get a run in your stocking, you can go up there to the department store and get you another pair of stockings on Sunday morning or whatever. That's gone. Way, way back. That went back when the riots were on. They didn't burn it, they just stole a whole lot of stuff out of it, just like they did Morton's Clothing Store on Pennsylvania Avenue and stuff. Oh, they went wild. And that was the year, the Easter, that all the kids had new clothes, and shoes and stuff, because they had raided the stores. [laughs] So everybody looked cute.

**CAUSEY:** So when the stadium opened, did that make a big change?

**PHINISEE:** Well, yeah, because it would mess up the parking. A lot of times you'd have to come home after 11 pm in order to park and that used to get on my nerves. And another thing, when they made this [Independence Avenue] one way, they weren't going to have parking on this street at all. And what little bit they were talking about went straight down the street into the hospital, when the jail was there. So, I wrote a letter and told them, I said, "You're not." Told them what they were doing and what they could do. Anyway, that's how we ended up with parking on both sides. [Mrs. Phinisee noted she got a reply to her letter.]

**CAUSEY:** Did they widen the street at some point?

**PHINISEE:** Yeah, when they widened the street and cut off the front lawn. The lawn used to go way out to the curb and it was a two-way street. Narrow. Then they made it four lanes, so you had a curb lane and two middle lanes. But they wanted everything to go one way with no parking. I said, "You can't take the parking away from people."

**CAUSEY:** Do you have access at the back?

**PHINISEE:** I've got a garage back there. We used to put the trucks in there, so it was built—it was for old post office trucks and they were big, tall and high. So we had to make it high. The door is ten feet tall, I think. Now, it's about the doors ... it could use another door now.

**CAUSEY:** What about other organizations that you've been involved with. Church? Have you maintained activities there or ...

**PHINISEE:** [Insert from written notes: I used to work on Sundays at the credit union at Holy Comforter Church at 14<sup>th</sup> and East Capitol Street.] No, I wasn't into church activities too much. I just did what I told you about, the Advisory Neighborhood Commission, and that was about the extent of being in any organization.

**CAUSEY:** And the teaching, when you had the, you called it the clay club for kids, the kids would come here once a week, or once a month?

**PHINISEE:** Yeah, and I forgot to put dates on things back then, and I don't know what year it was or what month it was, so I can't think, "Why'd I do that?" But anyway, I know I did it, if nobody else does.

**CAUSEY:** And you taught some adults sometimes, too.

**PHINISEE:** Yeah, I taught the adults. I also taught at Senior Citizens Building, Fourth and M Street SE, for the DC Recreation. I taught ceramics there. They had a kiln. They needed somebody to teach ceramics and I hadn't, I wasn't working then.

I had worked at PEPCO. I've been so many places, I forget about. But, anyway, I fired myself, see. [laughs] They had a man who thought it would be a good idea to hire senior citizens. So they hired ten, and I was one of the ten. And they scattered us around PEPCO. You could be on the phone. You could be a receptionist at the desk. You could be a lot of things, you could do ... I was on the phone, talking to customers. When you would call 823-7500, I would answer the phone, find the complaint or whatever. This is just an aside. One day, Jim Vance [local TV newscaster] called. I forget what he wanted. I told him that I like the ties he wears. They took me off the phone. [laughs] You've got no business talking to customers like that. I didn't know that, you know.

**CAUSEY:** That wasn't an ordinary customer.

**PHINISEE:** At least they didn't fire me! They sent me out to the satellite office in Maryland. Forestville. And that's where people could go pay their bills out there. So I stayed out there, what was it, until 1993.

But, they used to have meetings, and you could go to the meetings, retirement meetings. I never went because I didn't think I wanted to retire. They were getting tired of me. So, they tried everything they could to get rid of me. New supervisors, none of them—I would never go to the retirement meeting. So one day, customers, (I think they were lying about me), and one day, they would have to wait and I'd keep a list and then tell them to go to the back and they'd talk about what they wanted to do for their bill and all that. So a lot of them were mad because they had to wait, or had to even go back there. Well, anyway, one morning the supervisor called me in and tells me something about the customer, what the customer said, and I told her something and she shot up out of the room. I told her, I don't brown nose anybody. She went "shoo" out the door. Next thing I know, here's the man from PEPCO. He must have had a helicopter waiting when she called. [laughs]. Well, he was out there before I could get out of the office, because I didn't go out after her. Before I could get out of there, he was standing at my desk and I was still cleaning my desk. I guess they figured they didn't have to tell me why, but she didn't like what I said. So, that's when I quit. That was my last job.

They tried to cut off my Social Security because of the way they were acting. So, I had two people, a customer and somebody else, one to write a letter and one as a witness that I wasn't crazy, that I was OK, and I hadn't never done anything to them. So I went out to the office of Social Security in Maryland and had a hearing and here she comes walking in with this woman smiling and I looked up at her and I didn't smile at her. And, I don't know why she was smiling at me after what she did. Anyway, we went in and sat at this hearing and I told the man exactly what I said—and my witness was sitting there—and I told the man exactly what I said and he dismissed it and I got my Social Security. Well, I was supposed to get my Social Security, but there was some kind of mix-up and this guy, Dan ... Illinois, I don't know whether he was a Congressman or a Senator, Dan Rostenkowski.

**CAUSEY:** Oh, yes, Congressman.

**PHINISEE:** He went to jail. I wrote to his office and told him my case about Social Security. He had his secretary do something. Anyway, I got my Social Security. He went to jail, but I got my Social Security. [laughs]

**CAUSEY:** He did good things for people. [laughs]

**PHINISEE:** So, it's been kind of up and down. But, about this neighborhood. It just, naturally, the whites kept moving out. Now they're moving back in. That's the brunt of the neighborhood.

**CAUSEY:** Have you spent much time, do you go down to Congressional Cemetery? Was that a place that you walked to at all?

**PHINISEE:** Well, I had a dog, see that picture of the dog? My friends trained him and used to take him down to Congressional Cemetery to do what he had to do. That's my connection. Oh, we did do something. A truck ran into the fence of the Congressional Cemetery and knocked the thing over plus knocked over the stone foundation and we fixed their fence.

**CAUSEY:** Ah, the old iron fence.

**PHINISEE:** The piece of their fence is still in our garage. So, I did do something for Congressional.

**CAUSEY:** Can you remember other ironwork projects around? You mentioned Martin Luther King Library.

**PHINISEE:** I had stuff on cards. I didn't put them—and I don't—I guess I could run across some invoices if I had made copies of them, but there were quite a few in the neighborhood. I know one out there by the Potomac Avenue Station, those houses out there, we put a rail up there. And on 15<sup>th</sup> Street, I put some window guards on one of those houses on 15<sup>th</sup> Street, is it coming through North or is it South Carolina? I always get them mixed up.

**CAUSEY:** Me, too.

**PHINISEE:** Well, anyway, that's about it and I got plenty. I had started to write them up and put them on discs but I'd have to go through and find out all that. And the McCauleys, I just happened to think of their name after I've tried to remember, they were an old white couple and he couldn't hear too good. Come to find out he had wax in his ear. Thought he was going deaf, but he wasn't. Anyway, they moved away. And another up at 1830, was it 35 or 45? 45 is a corner, 43, one of those two, second house from the corner. There was a white couple, a man, used to every Sunday morning he'd go up and down the alley hollering about his Jesus, ranting about the neighborhood changing. And there was a couple across the alley; they used to fight every Sunday morning. And there is still ... is anybody left? ... no. I was friends with the girl on this block; I don't know where she is now. Her father was the one who was ranting and raving. And her brother used to work for the Greyhound Bus Station. And he married a black girl and they had kids. Haven't heard from him and don't know where he is. And all my neighbors, all my neighbors, the one over there, the one next door, one down this way, they're all gone. They died. So, I don't have too much family to find out anything. What I don't have, I'll never have because I can't ask anybody. And there might be a whole lot that I haven't told you.

**CAUSEY:** I'm going to stop the tape now for just a minute. [I asked Mrs. Phinisee if there were other subjects she wanted to raise and she remembered that she had not finished the story about St. Elizabeth's.]

[Tape resumes]

**PHINISEE:** That architect, he had done the drawing wrong, so when they got to the shop, I mean, when they got to the job, they had put up—it was for a platform—they had put up the posts for the platform. Then they called back to say the platform was short. It didn't go all the way out to the edge. So I had to redo my contract and order another piece to join on to that, so I could finish the job. So, St. Elizabeth's was crazy.

**CAUSEY:** No pun intended. So, you were the owner, you were the business manager, you were the salesperson.

**PHINISEE:** I was the owner. And all the other stuff came with it.

**CAUSEY:** But, you'd have to subcontract for the drawings, architectural drawings.

**PHINISEE:** Yeah, because I didn't do the drawings. I didn't have too many fancy drawings like that, but I needed it to show them. But you couldn't tell by the drawing that there was a short platform. I couldn't, and of course, the man wouldn't admit to it and he had Indian people working for him, East Indian. But, anyway, there's—that's about it. I mean, there's more, that's not all of it. Well, if I think of anything else, can I tell you?

**CAUSEY:** We can add it on at some point, absolutely.

END OF TAPE 2/SIDE 1

END OF INTERVIEW