

Pittsburgh Oral Histories
Pennsylvania Department
Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh



JP

Interviewed by Barry Chad

Interviewed at Plum Senior Community Center

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Interviewer's Note

A globe-trotting trouble-shooter, his expertise and know-how with power boilers, still put him in demand by companies throughout the world—at Heinz, West Penn Hospital, US Steel, refineries, steel mills, power plants—not your run-of-the-mill boilers that you would find in an apartment building or a house: these are monsters! Traveling the Asian Pacific Rim: China, Thailand, the Philippines, Indonesia; Africa: Ethiopia, Ghana, Nigeria, Angola, Kenya; South America; Egypt, Israel. In so much of this active Veteran's life his calm, strong spirit declares itself.

Interview

[Our conversation has begun before the digital voice recorder has been activated. So JP and I begin our interview, as it were, in mid-stream. We come back to the “beginning” towards the end of this transcription.]

bc: I have a really lazy side to me, but I would struggle to keep my independence. If I suddenly became incapacitated and was stuck at home, I would do everything I could.... In talking with Mr. Mossburg, Plum Center is really a neat place. Not only is it neat, it's high energy too. I can't believe how busy it is, how active it is. He said to me that this is probably the busiest senior center in Western Pennsylvania.

JP: I wouldn't be surprised. Just for myself, I'm on the Advisory Group Committee here. I'm part of the Activity Committee and I help plan activities going on. Fridays we have a group that comes in: I started working on jewelry-making to increase my hand/eye coordination—you know, from the stroke. I come in on Friday with my beads and I sit here and I make jewelry along with other people. I've met many people here. I'm here perhaps four out of five days. It gets me out of the house. I'm with other people that I can communicate with. Every Thursday afternoon we have a stroke support group. So, more or less, I pattern my week around what happens here and what happens at the American Legion. That's my week. I find myself working harder now since I'm retired....

bc: But you were probably very social before you retired.

JP: Not as much as now because when I was working, I was working international travel. So it was not at all uncommon for me to leave and be gone four or five months overseas. Consequently, when I came home, I stayed at home. I didn't want to travel. I'd seen enough of people while I was traveling. However, I've always been very active in the American Legion here. If I wasn't at the American

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Legion, I was at home. I was always very content: when I got home, “my world” was within two or three miles of the house, that was it. I had friends, but I was not as outgoing before I retired: I wanted peace and quiet when I came home.

bc: You worked with boilers. These weren't ordinary boilers that you worked with when you were working?

JP: Like a boiler in a house? No. I'm talking about power boilers. Case in point: over at the Carnegie Library: you know the powerhouse that sits down in the hollow [Panther Hollow] there? I've done a ton of work down there. I put boilers in down there; I've done testing down there. Downtown Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh Allegheny County Thermal: the first boiler that ever went in, I was responsible for the hookups, startups.... I've done every boiler down there. And they still call me when they have problems. I've put boilers in at Heinz, West Penn Hospital, a lot of the U. S. Steel plants. They're specialized boilers: refineries, steel mills, power plants.... About the last job I did before I really retired, was the Fincha project—it was a quasi-government project and the name of the town was Fincha—in Ethiopia—and that was in a high valley (at 4500 feet). My company was responsible for the boiler system for a new sugarcane plant where they were refining sugarcane. I was there for the boilers for that sugarcane plant. They're not your run-of-the-mill boilers that you would find in an apartment building or a house: these are monsters.

bc: You've been all over the world.

JP: Oh yeah. I've worked the Asian Pacific Rim: China, Thailand, the Philippines, Indonesia. I've worked Africa: Ghana, Nigeria, Angola, Kenya. I've worked all of South America. I've worked Egypt, Israel. I've worked all over the world.

bc: How did you get into this profession, this career?

JP: I had started working with boilers when I first went into the Navy. I had a number of years boiler experience from the Navy.

bc: On ships?

JP: Yes. So, consequently, when I came out, I really wasn't even looking for a job, but I was contacted by this company in Erie, Pennsylvania. At that time it was called Erie City Iron Works. I went to work for them in 1969.

bc: They heard about you?

JP: At that time, when you got out of the Service—and I filed my DD214 with the County—that's my Discharge, the County sent my Discharge over to the Employment Office, but I really wasn't looking for work.... They were looking for people so they called me.

bc: You obviously have a reputation within this field. When you were in the Navy, the boilers—what were they powered by?

JP: Heavy oil. Black oil. #6 fuel. Very heavy, viscous fuel looked like tar. You had to heat it up to burn it.

bc: Ever have any close calls—exploding boilers?

JP: No. Never exploding boilers. Some of the close calls I've had—one in particular—we had a fuel oil supply line rupture. That was spraying hot fuel at a 1000 pounds pressure. I dove through the hot oil—you had an emergency

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shut-down—and I dove through and grabbed the emergency shut-down and tripped the system to shut the oil down. This was probably on one of my first NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) cruises.

bc: Where were you born?

JP: Born right here in Pittsburgh. West Penn Hospital. 1940. At that time my family lived on Wylie Avenue—between Wylie Avenue and Webster Avenue—until 1952 or 1953. St. Clair Village was first opening up. If you didn't have a job, you couldn't get into St. Clair Village. We were there until I went into the Service in 1957. I enlisted. I was in the Service from 1957 until October 1968. So almost twelve years I was in.

bc: What kinds of memories do you have of The Hill from back then?

JP: Good memories. It was fun. Very close-knit neighborhoods. Everyone knew everyone. "Teenie" Harris? [Charles "Teenie" Harris, photographer for the *Pittsburgh Courier*.] He lived catty-corner up the street from us. I can remember "Teenie" Harris when I was this big. He and his sons, I remember him. Seeing him was just like seeing "regular" people on the street. A very close-knit community and, back in those years, we were taught respect. You were taught respect for your elders and for everyone. In fact, if I was caught or if anyone in the neighborhood was caught misbehaving someplace else, if one of our neighbors caught us misbehaving, they spanked us. They took us home and we got another spanking when we got home. You learned respect at an early age. You didn't cut-up in school. I came out of school with a very good education. I started out in elementary school at Faith Lutheran Church. They had a school in the Church. I went to Faith Lutheran Church School until I was in the fourth grade. Then I went to Madison School. From Madison to Herron Hill Junior High. From Herron Hill Junior High I went to Knoxville when we moved. From Knoxville I went to South High School and I graduated from South High School.

Like I said, growing up in The Hill was a very unique experience.

bc: Did redevelopment destroy The Hill?

JP: Yes it did. It did. Before they had redevelopment, you had the communities. And, back in those days, there was no problem: you went from community to community. Everyone knew everyone else. Like, my father belonged to the Elks band, North Side Elks band. So, when I got of age, I played trumpet, I was in the Elks band.

bc: Do you still play trumpet?

JP: No longer. I played for about 30 years though.

We knew everyone.

Through their so-called "redevelopment," they disrupted the complete make-up of The Hill District. They tore all of that stuff down. "Oh we're going to take this... and we're going to put this in...we're going to put this in...we're going to put this in....

They put nothing in!

All they wanted to do was to get those people out of there so they could get their Civic Arena in and their new stuff in.... And that was the beginning of the end.

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People lost hope because they saw that the community was being torn apart and there was nothing we could do about it. We lost some knowledgeable people that left Pittsburgh. I don't think the governing bodies cared. They got what they wanted and the hell with everybody else.

They ripped the heart out of The Hill District.

Think about it: some of the best nightclubs were in The Hill District—the Crawford Grill, the Hurricane, the Loendi Club.... Of course I wasn't old enough to go there, but my father went there. Friends we knew went there. People from all over the city, all over the county went to those clubs. And the big names—when they came into town, they might do something Downtown Pittsburgh but, at two o'clock in the morning, they were in the clubs up in The Hill District because that's where it was at. It was very vibrant. You found people helping each other. And they tore that apart. Once they got rid of that Lower Hill District, nothing else went in there and people just lost any hope they had....

bc: What was it like living in St. Clair Village? (You were there about four years.)

JP: When we first moved to St. Clair Village, like I said, if you didn't have a job, you couldn't live at St. Clair Village back in those days. My father was with the Post Office Department. There were other people [who worked at] the Post Office Department. There were city firemen; there were city police officers.

bc: Was it integrated?

JP: Oh yes. There was no such thing as this section is Black, and that section is white. No—same building—you had Blacks and whites living in the same building. You had Blacks and whites living next door to each other. The whole project was that way. And there were no problems. People got along. If you didn't like somebody, you didn't like them because you didn't like them!

Surprisingly, I didn't run into the racial issue until I went into the Service.

You didn't have the [racial issue] at St. Clair Village. If my buddy was over there, I went to his house—he may have been white, Black, green, blue—I went to his house; he came to my house. We partied back and forth. People understood each other and people got along very well. I have nothing but the fondest of memories of my years when I lived at St. Clair Village. At that time it was a good place to live.

bc: You graduated high school and then you went into the Service. What led you to the Service?

JP: Well, I knew I wasn't going to college. My father couldn't afford it. I was one of eight kids. My father couldn't afford to send me to college. My Dad had been in the Navy Reserve. And I didn't see any—how would I say it—any good work at that time. From the time I was 13 until I went into the Service I usually held two jobs. One I worked at Schenley Park—they used to have a riding stable there. I worked at the riding stable until I went into the Service: grooming, feeding the horses...trail-riding. I was trail boss for a number of years. And, along with that job, I sold the bulldog edition of the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* on the South end of the Liberty Tubes. "Bulldog"—that was the night edition. (The bulldog edition was the morning paper, but it came out at night. And we would be on the South

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end of that island on the South end of the Liberty Tubes. We were on that island selling newspapers from seven till eleven in the evening. It was either the *Post-Gazette* or the *Sun-Telegraph*. I'm thinking it was the *Post-Gazette*.) After I graduated, I went looking for jobs and I couldn't find work. I wasn't going to be a burden on my family so I went into the Service. And, like I said, I spent about twelve years in the Service.

bc: Please talk about your career in the Service.

JP: I had good times in the Service; I had some bad times. I did three tours of duty in Vietnam.

bc: Where did you do your basic training?

JP: Great Lakes, Illinois. In the winter. It was cold. We did our basic training and we did a lot of it outdoors. Great Lakes Training Center. Outside of Waukegan, Illinois. It was a big Naval base. It was a training base. In fact, all the while I was in boot camp, I never saw a ship. Everything was on shore. We did (just like the Army did) our physical training in the morning; we did our close-order drill; we did our hiking; we did our running: what they called "PT." Along with learning as much seamanship as you could learn on shore. I left there and I went to Norfolk, [Virginia] and I served on a ship in Norfolk. (I wasn't too keen with Norfolk because, back in those years, the segregation issue was very big...)

bc: Late '50s, early '60s.

JP: ...and Virginia was foremost.

When we left the base in Norfolk, you had all these establishments outside the base—Blacks were not allowed in any of them. None of them. Only place we could go was...we had one or two streets down in Norfolk proper where we went. Because we weren't allowed. And the restaurants, bars...we weren't allowed. So, from there I went to Florida. Which was a little better. You still had some segregation, but you had some places in Jacksonville Beach that they didn't care: Black or white made no difference. You could go in and out. In Jacksonville, we had a section of Jacksonville that was for Black sailors—Black military.

bc: How did the men you served with feel about all of this?

JP: We didn't like it, but, at that time, it was S.O.P. [Standard Operating Procedure]. How are you going to fight it when the military did nothing about it? The military condoned it. If the military condoned it, what could we do about it? You had two alternatives: either you went there [where you were permitted] or you stayed on base. You took the lesser of two evils. It left a bad taste in the mouth. I remember when I came back and I was stationed in Bainbridge, Maryland, for a while, and, even Bainbridge, Maryland, right outside the base they had restaurants [where] we weren't allowed. Like I said—the military brass it was okay to them. If I went anywhere, I went to Aberdeen Proving Grounds, which was a ways down the road, where we had an NCO [Noncommissioned Officer] club and, it was either that or go back up into Philadelphia, which was a little ride, or go down to Baltimore, which was another ride.

bc: What rank did you achieve?

JP: E7—Chief Petty Officer.

bc: If you went in in '57 /'58, did you see Vietnam coming?

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JP: No. The first I knew about it was '63. I was transferred. I went to Mare Island out in California.

I said, What am I doing here?

Well, you're going to Vietnam Naval Advisory Group.

What am I going over there for?

And I found out....

bc: You would have been an advisor to the South Vietnamese Navy.

JP: I was there when the "Gulf of Tonkin Resolution" was signed in '64. I saw my share of action.

bc: Now that you're retired, you're still very busy.

JP: Oh yes. When I first retired, I did a lot of fishing and a lot of hunting and then, last year, I had a stroke. I was sitting home feeling sorry for myself; and, somebody got me to come up here to the Senior Citizens Center. On my very first day, a gentleman was here and I mentioned the fact that I'd had a stroke and he came and grabbed me and he said,

My name is Terry Kuhn and we have a stroke support group and you're going to be in it!

I said, Well, okay.

And that started it—me coming up for the stroke support group, seeing what was going on up here. I got to know the people at the center. I began to enjoy really coming to the center. It gave me some purpose as to what I wanted to do. At that point I began volunteering for the center and I started joining in different programs, working with the activities group.... I've planned a couple of get-togethers so far. Those are the main things I do up here.

bc: What kind of "support" does the stroke support group provide?

JP: We meet every Thursday. And, if I have a bad day—sometimes I still have bad days—there's someone I can talk to, someone that understands what I'm going through because the average person has no idea what a person's going through when they're recovering from a stroke. (I don't wish that on anyone.) I am one of those lucky few in that I have very few outward signs that I've had a stroke.

bc: This has been a real struggle, a real fight to come back?

JP: Oh yes, every day, every day. Through the stroke support group...we're constantly going someplace and I'm also always going with other stroke survivors. We're survivors. We're constantly going places. And, when you're able to talk with your peers, fellow stroke-survivors, when I'm able to talk with them, it helps me. Tomorrow, this group and the group from Springdale, we're going to the Zoo. We'll spend the day at the Zoo. It's something for me to do, something interesting. We've gone to the Andy Warhol Museum.

(bc: I've got to interrupt to ask you: what did you think of the Warhol?

JP: I liked the Warhol. I didn't go to see what Andy Warhol did, but they had that exhibition that was showing—before World War II and during World War II—Nazism in Germany.

bc: About the Nazi experiments.

JP: Yes. I went to see that and, when I came out of there, I was sickened and I was angry. I was literally angry that a people could be so callous to do the things

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that they did without a care, without looking back. And it was accepted as the status quo. And I think that everyone I went with from the stroke support groups—had the same feeling. When I got back, I was telling everybody, You need to go see that. It would open your eyes as to some of the things that were done. I was glad that I went to the Warhol Museum to see that.)

The stroke support group goes to concerts. We went to the Carnegie Museum. We're constantly going places to keep our interest up. This is what we need because it helps me from dwelling on what my handicaps are.

The American Legion: I've been a member of the American Legion, Plum, Post 890, for 29 years. In fact, right now, I'm running for Commander. We vote the end of this month. I'm running to be the Commander for the next year. I do a lot of things with them. I plan a lot of their activities. I'm in charge of the kitchen up there—what menus they put out. I do anything up there that helps me stay busy. Right now, when the Commander's not there, I'm second-in-command. We have, approximately, regular members, 980-990, and we have about 950 social members. We have a very large Legion.

bc: Recent Veterans—are they joining the Legion like older Veterans?

JP: We are getting a lot of the Veterans from Desert Storm, from Iraqi Freedom; we're beginning to get more from Vietnam—which is what we need because the older Veterans of World War II they're dying out very very rapidly. But we are lucky that we are getting a lot of the new Veterans because we do everything we can to try to help them: they have a problem, we have a service officer that they can get in touch with and [who] will go to bat for them. We do what we can to help them. We've been very lucky. I like to think we've got one of the best Legion posts in the area.

bc: Your "service officer"—does that person use his or her muscle to get through the bureaucracy?

JP: That's his purpose. You call—you say: Hey, I'm having problems doing [such-and-such] and I don't know which way to go. It's [the service officer's] job to get down there and investigate—find out—where you should go—phone numbers, people to talk to, and what else to do if that doesn't pan out—and give it to you—and then guide you through the steps. That's the purpose of the service officer.

Plus, we do the new Southwestern Home for Veterans—off Highland Drive below the VA Highland Drive. We're up there every week. We give bingos to the Veterans up there every week. We bring them out to our post for picnics, for parties.... We're always collecting books and giving them books every month. We do everything we can to try to make the Veterans that are "in-house" as comfortable as possible. We do a lot. It gives me a reason to keep working at things.

bc: How has Pittsburgh and Western Pennsylvania changed in your lifetime?

JP: In my lifetime in some ways it's changed fantastically. I can remember when I was a young lad—I've been an avid fisherman ever since I was three- or

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four-years-old—my Daddy used to take me fishing—and I can remember when you couldn't catch anything in the rivers—nothing. Now I fish on the rivers on a constant basis. You can catch any type of game fish that can be caught in the rivers. They've cleaned the rivers up. Of course it was at a terrible price: 40- 50-thousand jobs lost when they closed the mills down. They cleaned the rivers up which is fine.

I still feel and many of my friends still feel that there's really not any work to keep people here. You can get the low-end, low-paying jobs here, but, as far as jobs that would make a person want to stay and put down roots here...especially younger people, out of college, I don't think there's anything here for them. That's why they leave. And, I think, that, for the minority the job opportunities are very very poor. A lot of them I know go to college—the first thing they do—they leave because they know they can go someplace else and they can get a job and get a better job than they'll get here in the city of Pittsburgh.... They talk a good game, but I don't see the evidence of it. In the service industry—there's all kinds of work; but, in big industry, in the big companies, I think minorities still lag way behind. And I'm not talking about African-Americans only...women [as well]. I think Pittsburgh is still woefully behind. Those are the things I've seen in Pittsburgh. She's my city. I said many years ago when I first started working: when I found a place that was better than Pittsburgh, I was going to move, but I'm still here. My wife and I go to a lot concerts; we go to a lot of Broadway productions and for me it's a half-hour and I'm down in the city. Everything that a person wants to see or experience, you can find in the city of Pittsburgh. When I'm talking about Classical music, any type of music, Broadway hit shows—they're here.

bc: You aren't the only person I've interviewed who has talked about what they called the "cultural amenities" of this area.