

Pittsburgh Oral Histories

Pennsylvania Department
Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh



JS

Interviewed by Barry Chad

Interviewed at Eat n' Park on McKnight Road, North Hills

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Interviewer's Note

Resident of Pittsburgh's Fineview neighborhood, one of the city's neighborhoods that provide magnificent views of the city's panoramas and almost everybody on his street still owns their own home. During the Depression his father drove a truck for More & Fleischer—heavy hauling; they went into mills and transferred steel rolls. Eventually he went with Duquesne Brewery driving a tractor trailer. One week he brought home a paycheck of \$2.50! Tales of slim living and of shopping at the much-

beloved North Side Market House. And stories of crossing the Atlantic in wartime and surviving.

Interview

JS: I was born on Sampsonia Street [Mexican War Streets, North Side of Pittsburgh]. May 1, 1925. I was four-months-old when we moved from Sampsonia down to Brighton Place. My Mom and Dad lived there for 32 years. And I lived there until I went in the Service. Right before I came out of the Service I got married. And I've lived up on the hill ever since then—in Fineview [a neighborhood of Pittsburgh].

bc: Do you have a decent view?

JS: A beautiful view, yes. Do you remember the tornado they had on Mount Washington? I saw that goin' through. (I wish I'd had a camera.) It went right across that hilltop. We were lucky. West End took a beating. That was bad. You'd never think that, up in the hills like we have around here, that you'd have a tornado. Whipped right across the top of Mount Washington.

[On our street things are still pretty good. It's a well-kept street.] My daughter works up at Channel 11. She's a receptionist up at Channel 11. [She and your co-worker at the Library, who gave you my name, are very good friends.] We all sing in the choir [at West View United Methodist Church]. In fact, when my great granddaughter, who is in the Junior Choir, when she sings with the Chancel Choir, we have four generations in the Choir.

bc: How many people are there in West View United Methodist Church?

JS: Well, our rolls show about 485.

bc: How many come to church on Sunday?

Pittsburgh Oral Histories

JS: Maybe we get 100...120. We have a lot of people that we have to carry on our rolls that actually don't even come to our church anymore. But they're still on our rolls so we have to carry them. They've never taken a "letter of transfer" and until they take that letter of transfer, we're responsible for them...and [for] the Annual Conference and [for] what you have to pay to the Conference for each person. (You're apportioned, and you have to pay that even though they're not there. You still have to pay it.)

bc: I've spoken with a number of people about how Pittsburgh neighborhoods have changed.

JS: With our street, almost everybody on our street still owns their own home. They're homeowners. And they take care of them.

bc: [We discuss how neighborhoods change.]

JS: See, now when I went to school, you got into an argument with a kid, you went out into the parking lot and you settled it with your fists—you know, if it got to that point. And then that was it. The next day you come in, if you got your fanny beat, you went over and you said, You got me yesterday; that was your day. Then they came along and started using knives. Now they use guns. I'll tell you it's scary.

bc: Where did you go to elementary school?

JS: Columbus. Right now it's on [what's called] Irwin Avenue. Columbus is still there, but it's a middle school. Right next to Columbus School was the girls' trade school. And they had a swimming pool in the trade school and when you got to the third grade at Columbus School, you had one period a week that you went to swim. They taught you to swim. You know how I learned to swim? They had "wings" and they fit across your chest here and they were blown up about that big on each side. [And the instructor said,] Go ahead and swim. Finally, you get enough confidence [and] you push [the wings] out of the way and you're swimming on your own. I used to swim a lot.

bc: You had said you went to Oliver High School. When you graduated from Oliver, you went into the Service?

JS: I graduated from high school on June 24, 1943 and July 19 I was in the Army.

bc: What was Oliver like in the '30s and '40s?

JS: Very nice school. Very nice. But everything was different then. You can't compare [then] with the way things are today.

bc: What did your family do during the Depression? How did they get by?

JS: I came up during the Depression. My Dad drove a truck for More & Fleischer. That was heavy hauling. They went into mills and transferred [steel] rolls and all that stuff. He was, actually, a rigger. (He moved heavy equipment.) He was with a company that, back in those days, you didn't have a union. So, the longer you worked for the company, you made a little more money than the guy under you. But if a job came in and the boss didn't feel like sending you on the job—even though you were supposed to be next in line—he'd send the guy out who was paid less money than you. So [my father] put up with that for a while until, I think it

Pittsburgh Oral Histories

was, 1937 when he went to work for Duquesne Brewery. He worked 32 years for Duquesne Brewery driving a tractor trailer. That changed our whole life. He had steady enough work that we couldn't get welfare. I remember one paycheck he brought home—it was a \$2.50 paycheck for the week. Back then it was more than [it would be today]. But that was for eight people! Eight people: I had four sisters; my blind aunt lived with us; and my Mom and Dad. There was eight of us.

bc: Your father, throughout his life, was a truck driver and for Duquesne Brewery on the South Side. So he had a car to get around with or did he take the streetcar?

JS: No. During the War he had a “B book” because he'd get called out maybe at two o'clock in the morning...say, he was making a trip to New Jersey...he might leave Pittsburgh at two o'clock in the morning and that would be a 32-hour trip. It was him and another guy on the truck. My Dad drove eight hours; and the other guy drove eight hours. But, to try to sleep on one of those trucks—they weren't like they are today. (They had good equipment, but they just weren't as “accommodating” as they are today.) [He laughs.] But we had a good life after that, after he started working at the Brewery. But many a time before that we'd have vegetable soup sometimes six nights a week. But my Mom always found some way (I don't know how she did it) but she always found some way that we had a roast for Sunday dinner. It'd be chicken; it'd be ham; it'd be roast beef. But the rest of the week: you better get set and eat vegetable soup—because that's what you're going to get. We didn't have anything else.

bc: If you were on the North Side, that means you shopped at the North Side Market.

JS: Every Friday night [at the North Side Market] we used to go down...you know where the Carnegie Library is. [Now the Allegheny Regional Branch of the Carnegie Library.] [That was] before they put the [Allegheny Center] Mall in. Well, right next to the Carnegie Library there was a street that went back. They called that the Diamond. There was Kahn's work clothes. (Louis Kahn owned it.) We used to park in that alley up from his place. Mom and Dad would go over to Kresge's or to the Market House. And then we all got an ice cream cone. At Isaly's. They used to have a long scoop that would go down in [the ice cream] like that and they called it “the peaks.” And [Isaly's] started the original Klondikes. (You know what you get today? You know what Klondikes look like today? [Well] they used to be that thick! [He illustrates by holding up his thumb and forefinger.]

bc: People still miss the Market.

JS: I said they ruined the North Side when they put the Mall in. And they did. They ruined the North Side. They did the same thing in East Liberty when they put the Mall in there, but then they wised up and [they came through] and they cut it—a street—right through the Mall, right through the center of the Mall. And that made a difference. But they never did that on the North Side. You could go in that Market House and you could find anything you wanted. From soup to nuts.

A kid I grew up with was Italian. I started to smoke when I was eleven-years-old. I used to sneak my mother's cigarettes. I'd sneak my mother's cigarettes and Joe Garino—he was my buddy that I grew up with—his dad had a fruit stand down

Pittsburgh Oral Histories

the North Side Market. And he used to get the lemons. We'd smoke cigarettes; then we'd suck lemons, thinking nobody would know we smoked cigarettes.

I had a blind aunt that lived with us and that woman was phenomenal. If you met her, you'd never think she was blind—in the house. (She got out of that house then she had to have somebody to help her.) [She knew where everything was in that house.] I think that's why my Mom and Dad stayed there so long. She knew every nook and cranny in that house. I'd come down in the morning to go to school and I'd had my books the night before and I put 'em in the cupboard. I came down and couldn't find my books. She'd walk in the cupboard, reach her hand back in there and say, Is this them? I'd say, Yeah. She was phenomenal. She knew Braille. [She learned Braille at the Pittsburgh Blind Association in Oakland.] They used to send things out [for her to work on at home] and they paid her. (I couldn't tell you what the amount was.) But she got a check from them every month for \$30. In the wintertime we got two ton of coal for our furnace from the Blind Association through her. She helped us a lot in the Depression, I'll tell you. That usually did us the whole winter.

bc: [I explain that the building formerly occupied by the Association is now a Carnegie Mellon University building.]

JS: I was there when I was in high school. I forget what class I was in...Social Studies or what.... But they took us over there one day, took us all through the building. [My aunt] used to make pot holders, and they would send the material [to our house] and then she would put the two pieces together with an insert. She would sew around it. It had a latticework that went around the outside with a little hook on it. And she would sew them on. [This was piecework she did at home.] When she was done, she would call and they would come and pick it up. And they would pay her—maybe a nickel a pot holder.

bc: Within just a few weeks of graduating from high school, you were in the Army.

JS: July 19 I was sworn in the Army. I come home and my Mom says, Well, you're an uncle again. (My second nephew was born the same day I went into the Army.)

bc: Did you see active duty?

JS: I wasn't in the front lines though. I was overseas. I had a job—I don't know if you ever heard of a job like this—I was in the Army [but] I rode Liberty Ships back and forth across the Atlantic.

bc: That sounds dangerous.

JS: We were what you called "ship's complement." There was a Lieutenant [and two Corporal Technicians]. We went on the ship with the Lieutenant. The first trip that we made over there was taking money over to Italy. They had just practically conquered Italy and they didn't want American money over there so they shipped over—I don't know how much; I couldn't tell you; but it was probably in the billions of lire, Italian lire, invasion money. And we had to guard that. We had half a shipload full of that.

bc: You were subject to submarine attacks.

JS: Yes, that's how they almost got us.

bc: You were part of a convoy, right?

Pittsburgh Oral Histories

JS: 75 ships. On the outer rim of the main convoy was all your explosives. Inside were your trucks and stuff like that. And then, in the middle, were the troops. They kept the troops in close together for as much protection as possible. We lost seven ships, I think, going over.

bc: You were attacked by subs?

JS: When we got over there, our destination was Palermo, Sicily. To get there you have to go through the Straits of Gibraltar. When the ships come through there, we had to slow them down--to either two or three ships--to get through the Straits 'cause they were so narrow there. And then the German subs would lay off the Spanish coast and attack. There was a sailor—when we were going through-- he and I were standing on the fantail of the ship 'cause I was assigned as a Number 3 Loader on a 3-inch gun. (The fantail, that was the rear of the ship.) And this torpedo came...and [our ship] turned...just enough.... I think it missed us by about 20 feet. (The other guy and I hugged one another.) It was scary. [JS shows me a beautiful and substantial ring that he received through the American Legion. On one side of the ring is a classic image of The Doughboy; on the other is an image of the National World War II Memorial in Washington, D.C., dedicated in 2004.]

bc: You went in in '43.

JS: April 6, 1946 I came out. I got married in 1945. My wife wanted to get married when I went in. And I said, No way; 'cause I don't know what's going to happen to me. I don't even know if I'm coming back. And I said, No, I won't do it. I made my Mom a promise that I wouldn't get married 'til the War was over. When I told [my mother] I was getting married—after I gave my wife the ring—[my Mom] said, You told me you weren't getting married 'til after the War. I said, No, Mom, I didn't tell you that; I told you I wouldn't get married until the War was over. I said, The War was over in August. I said, We're getting married in November.

Here's a thing for you: I was in the Service...[yet] I had to get my mother's permission to get married...'cause I wasn't 21.

bc: Where did you and your wife meet?

JS: A & P Tea Company. We both worked for A & P. I was still going to school. I worked from five at night to seven at night. I ran the dairy counter—cigarettes, candy, cheese, milk, coffee....

We had a good life. I just lost her two years ago. We missed 60 years by three months. We had a good life. I remember all the good things.

bc: After you got married, what did you do for a living?

JS: A little bit of everything—until I went to work for Nabisco. [Until then I had at least ten jobs.] Every time I'd get a job, I'd go on night turn. (My kids grew up almost without me being home.) My kids were eleven- and twelve-years-old when I went to work for Nabisco; and I was on night turn there for about two-and-a-half years and finally I got on daylight. And, boy, nobody was going to shake me off that from then on.

Pittsburgh Oral Histories

bc: Of those ten jobs which was the most unusual or the one you liked the most?

JS: I really didn't like any of them.

[bc laughs.]

Well, the one I liked the most is when I worked for my brother-in-law at the gas station. I pumped gas, greased cars, changed tires.... Remember when they used to call them service stations? That's what we had.

I came home in April on a three-day pass and [my brother-in-law] says, Come on, I want you to take a ride with me. I said, Okay. We got in his car. We're driving...and I say, Where in the heck are we going? He says, I'm going to show you something. So, we go out through the West End, out Noblestown Road, down Noblestown Road to Poplar Street. And he pulls in this place and he says, You see that building? I said, Yeah. (It was an old gas station. And Young's Café was behind it. In fact Young was the original owner when that gas station was first opened. He was a beer distributor too. And then he went back and opened up a saloon in the back. Young first had a gas station; then he had a beer distributorship; he then closed both and opened Young's Café.) So I said to [my brother-in-law], What are you going to do with this? He said, I'm going to open a gas station here. (He was an iron worker. And he made good money. But he was getting to the age he didn't want to climb the steel no more. He wanted to get out.) So I said, What are you going to do for customers? There's nothing there. The only thing that was there was Young's Café. And the other side of the hill was all Victory Gardens and farmland. I said, Where are you going to get your customers? He said, This place, after the War, is going to boom; and he said, I'm going to be right here when it does. Son-of-a-gun, boy he was right! It did really boom. He bought two lots next to the station we had and he put a new station up there.... If you came down there on a Saturday or a Sunday and you didn't have an appointment to get in to have something done...don't even bother coming...you couldn't get in. That's how busy we were. He had a terrific business. I worked for him for five years.

bc: And you worked for Nabisco for 30 years. Was this the plant in East Liberty?

JS: Oh no. I was down on Noblestown Road. It was a shipping branch. We shipped to all the different stores. We went clear into Ohio, West Virginia....

bc: So you weren't baking.

JS: No, actually I was a router. That's what my job was: I routed the trucks that went to all these different places. So, when your store had a special on Oreos or something, I'd ship that stuff out; and, if that stuff wasn't there the day it was supposed to be, I'm the one that got the call, Where is my merchandise?

bc: This is interesting: your father was in the trucking industry and you...

JS: Never wanted to drive a truck. Never wanted to drive a truck. I just routed them.... Actually I started out with Nabisco as a janitor when I first started working.... And then I worked myself up to a stocker and then I worked myself up to the routing job...and that job started at six o'clock in the morning and I was done at two o'clock in the afternoon. I loved that job. I loved that. You had practically the whole day to yourself.

Pittsburgh Oral Histories

My Dad took me on a trip when he drove for More & Fleischer Heavy Hauling. This was an old Mack truck. [It was chain-driven.] Side curtains on the thing. The seats were hard as a rock. He took me down to Weirton, West Virginia, to pick up two big rolls of steel. And when we come back home, I said, Dad, I never want to be a truck driver. My hind end and my back were so sore—and I was a young kid!

bc: You've been retired for some time now.

JS: I retired in 1986.

bc: Church is obviously a big part of your life. How do you spend your time: your hobbies and stuff like that?

JS: Well, I like to do woodwork for one thing. I have a shop: I have a lathe, a radial arm saw; I have a sander; I have a planer; I have a joiner; I have a drill press. [I just picked up my mechanical ability on my own.] I didn't know anything about the gas station when I went to work there. My brother-in-law, more or less, he showed me the ropes. The funny thing was—he owned the gas station, but there

were people that came in the gas station to get their car worked on, they wouldn't let him touch it. They wanted to know when [J.S.] was there. "I'll bring it back when [J.S.] is here." Oh he used to get upset about that. I said, Hey, I can't help it. They liked my work. But that was the name of the game back in those days. It wasn't a gas station or a filling station—it was a service station. And, boy, I'll tell you—my brother-in-law! If a person came in and you serviced that car and you didn't ask that person, "May I check your water and oil?" He'd take you in the back room and he'd chew you out.

I made two good moves in my life: the first one was meeting my wife and marrying her; and the second was retiring.

[Also, having seen the wonderful work that hospice volunteers do], I am [now] a hospice volunteer. I visit a man, he's 97-years-old. I visit him every two weeks. He still lives by himself. He was still climbing telephone poles at 72. He worked for Bell Telephone. He was in my brother-in-law's outfit in the Second World War, 28th Division, Keystone Division. When I went out to visit him the first time, we were talking about the War 'n' 'at...and I said, "What outfit were you in?" "28th." I said, "My brother-in-law was in the 28th Division, but he was in Artillery." He said, "What was his name?" [And when I told him], he said, "I knew him! He was in Company A. I was in Company B." Can you imagine that?

bc: Over the years how have Pittsburgh and Western Pennsylvania changed?

JS: I'd have to say, as far as [the environment], it's much better 'cause they got rid of the mills; they got rid of all that dirt. People are living longer. (They didn't live that long before. It had to be from the dirt from the mills, the soot and all that stuff.) In other ways I think it's worse. People aren't the same. Half the people in my neighborhood, I don't even know--whereas, before, you'd go "Hi, Joe!" "Hi, Jim!" "Hi, Bill!" You knew everybody. It's better environmentally, but you don't

Pittsburgh Oral Histories

have the camaraderie with the people. Even your politicians. I'm so disgusted with these politicians—not just local.

I'm thankful for being here 82 years, but, if the Lord calls me tomorrow, I am ready to go. Thank God all the good days outweighed the bad days, as far as I'm concerned.