

Pittsburgh Oral Histories

Pennsylvania Department
Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh



JS

Interviewed by Barry Chad

Interviewed at his apartment at Seneca Hills

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Interviewer's Note

Great stories about business and industry in Western Pennsylvania. An enormous toolbox/trunk, from 1907, prominent in his compact rooms and invested with mystery and with personality and with character. Back in the '30s— \$75 a semester—\$150 a year to attend the University of Pittsburgh. A man with the gumption and business sense to recommend the elimination of the entire department that he himself supervised!

Interview

bc: Have you always lived in Pittsburgh / Western Pennsylvania?

JS: Yes.

bc: Before you retired, what did you do for a living?

JS: I was an accountant for the Union Switch & Signal. We were in Swissvale at the time in a big plant. I have a picture of it up here on the wall. The way it was. There are pictures of its [demolition]. The Edgewood Shopping Center is there now. I had an office located in here [he points], the factory accounting department. I had about 50 employees under my supervision. Eventually I recommended they do away with the department. [He chuckles.]

bc: What did Union Switch & Signal do, what do they do?

JS: Essentially they were in the railroad train controls and signals. Basically it was their business, at least it was when I retired. I've been retired 25 years since then. They may have developed a lot of new products.... My father was also an employee of the Union Switch. I have his toolbox here—that trunk.

bc: [I let out a gasp. This toolbox/trunk is a great, massive, solid piece of furniture that would drive any little kid nuts with its sense of mystery and of the grown-up world.]

JS: It was made in 1907. And even that box that my father got to set it on was a Packard Motor Company parts box, made in 1907, and it has the date in it. I'm quite proud of this. See, there's four saws; these are files; there are drills.

bc: It smells great.

JS: Of course I have bought tools and added to it. When I built my home, I used this (a really nice quality trowel) to do some cement work. There are some tools in here that I've had appraised—this jack plane, that's a real antique. All these tools, [these hand tools], have been taken over by power, power hand tools. You

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can't find a wrench like that [today]. This outfit, [this trunk], has been all over the Eastern United States.

bc: [On the inside of the lid of the toolbox is a pasted label.]

JS: My dad liked to collect these things and he pasted a lot of them in here. Some of them fall off; couple of 'em I've put up here. [That label that you're looking at], that's from Elbert Hubbard, isn't it?

bc: This is a Roycrofters printing, yes!

[I read aloud the label:]

I will taboo the gabfest

Kaibosh the killjoy

Hickorino the pooh pooh

Cut the grump and grouch

And get on to my job

JS: That was my dad's philosophy.

bc: When you moved out of your home, you chose to salvage this toolbox.

JS: I've had this for years. I was five-years-old when my father took one of these saws and he said, "Here, Jack, I'm gonna show you how to saw a piece of wood. And my mother had a fit. Next thing I know, the saw jumped and hit my thumb. She said, "See! John, I told you he was going to cut himself!" [But it didn't hurt.]

bc: To be an accountant and wind up being the head of your Department, where did you go to school?

JS: Well, I went a couple of years to Pitt [University of Pittsburgh] in Business Administration. My dad wanted me to get a good education in Business. Started in 1935. My father died in Christmas of 1936. And that was the end of my financial support for going to school. Even though it was only \$75 a semester—\$150 a year to go to Pitt! Anyway, I just had to go to work. I had taken a lot of mechanical drawing at school and I thought I could be a draftsman 'cause I was doing all kinds of machinery—drawing machine parts. And I went to the Switch to apply for a job and they said, We don't need any draftsmen, but we need a time clerk and that's a job for you. Well, I took it, 'cause I needed a job; and I never got out of the Accounting Department. [He laughs.] So that was the way it went.

They were working on piece work and the clerks had to turn in time cards. Incidentally, they were IBM cards. We were one of the first companies to take on the IBM card system. And we had to give the workers one of these decks of cards that told them what jobs they were to do and then we were to post them on a master card system and they were all verified by the foreman so they couldn't be cheating on turning in their time. So we did a lot of time-keeping. Every day we had to make a report.

bc: Did you see Service?

JS: No, I was married and had children, worked in—it was considered—a defense plant. We made a lot of armament--pistols, and bombs, and all kinds of ammunition.

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bc: Does that mean that Union Switch & Signal switched over from what they were normally doing in behalf of the War effort?

JS: Every square foot they could convert into manufacture of war material, they did. I guess they still made some railroad material because there would be [a need] for that.

Part of my job—one time—I was promoted from a time-keeper to what we called the factory accounting, which is a strange accounting arrangement. I had charge of all the scrap reports: a worker would spoil a piece; the inspector would make out a 303 Form and that was a scrap report. And my job was to add up the value of all those every month. That was part of the “loss” of the operation.

bc: How did you rise within Union Switch & Signal to be head of your department?

JS: I guess attrition had something to do with it because I was sort of the youngest.... The factory accounting was actually an antique...an old-fashioned way of keeping track of costs. Any man in the factory that was injured and couldn't work on his job anymore, they put him in the factory accounting doing pencil work. I rose in the Department through the older men dying and I just survived. In any event, it was survival of the fittest, as you would say.... When I became factory accountant, there was all this to-do in the newspapers.... After two months, I said to my boss, You know, there's only one man that's working for me that does anything worthwhile. There's about four young men out here that should be doing something that they are interested in. I said, I recommend we eliminate the Department. Well!! [He laughs.] I'm out of a job! [He laughs.] And they took me up on it.

I became supervisor of what they called General Services. I had charge of all the office machinery, typewriters, the telephone system throughout the whole plant. I had to know where all the phones were. The reception area. General files. And I became a kind of a nuisance.... One day I was looking in the stenographer pool in the engineering department, and I said to [one of the stenographers],

I see you're doing five carbons on that typewriter.

I said, How come you have to do so many?

She says, That isn't the half of it. This is the fourth time I've done five copies.

I said, You have to make 20 copies of one letter!? What's the letter all about?

She says, It's just three sentences: “We sent drawing number so-and-so to you on such-and-such a date.”

Well, why do you have to make so many copies of that?

Because every guy in this office has to have a copy in his drawer.

And I said, Well, we have the general files. One copy down there would be enough.

Next thing you know I got copying machines in there and said, You make one copy and send it to my file. (I was in charge of general files.)

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And then the Engineering Department kind of got upset with me doing that. I had a little session with my boss about it...we got that straightened out.... It was kind of interesting.

bc: You were like in the advance guard of cutting down on excessive paperwork.

JS: My Scout Master was an engineer there and we used to talk very candidly about all the paperwork (and this is Chick Fields). He said, Jack, you know this company's going to drown some day in all the paperwork we're doing: unnecessary. Anyway, I did that for about two years and then they put me back in the accounting business and I became manager of accounts payable and that was pretty interesting too. We had to make sure that every bill we paid, we got the material or the service. I had a lot of calls from people all over the country 'cause we weren't paying bills on time. Money was a little short and I wasn't able to pay all the bills. My outlook on that was that any businessman in Swissvale that gave us a bill, he was going to be paid first. And U. S. Steel and General Electric—and some of those big companies—they could wait a month or so 'til they got paid.

I started at the Union Switch in 1937. As a shop clerk I was advised right then, You join the Union. And it's just a little clerks' union. They called it the Employees Association; a dollar a year dues. Okay. So, after ten months we had a little setback. We got all the flood business taken care of and we were dropping down in business so we had a layoff. And everybody with less than ten months of service was to be laid off. Well, it turned out that I was within one day—another fellow and I—we were within one day of the ten months. So our boss said, If you fellows want to work [another week], we'll let you do that. Well that sounded fair enough. So we agreed. On Monday, when we came back to work, the Union said to our boss, We can't accept that; those guys have to be laid off. So we were gone.

Well then I got a job at Joseph Horne and Company, downtown. We got a ten dollar bill and two two's every Tuesday: that was our pay: 14 a week. [He chuckles.]

bc: They paid you in two-dollar bills?

JS: Yeah. Two-dollar bills. I only lasted on that job about a year-and-a-half and I got back at the Switch.

bc: What did you do at Horne's?

JS: I'll tell you—you did everything they asked you to do, but essentially I worked in the printing department. I cut paper for the printing press from big reams of paper. I bound books. I ran lots of errands all over the city. At that time, [the] Pittsburgh Point [where the Allegheny and Monongahela form the Ohio] was still a lot of little shops down there, and we had outfits down there that would make printing plates and I'd go after them. One day somebody comes up in the department and says, We need some help down here in the candy department: we're getting behind on decorating Easter eggs. So the next thing I know I was decorating Easter eggs. [He laughs.] They had a good candy shop there. And then one day, secretary to Burchfield (head of Joseph Horne Company) was absent

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and they knew I could write shorthand and type so they sent me down there to take dictation from him and type some letters—something he couldn't wait for.... I even had to go over to the warehouse one day to help unload a truck. Nobody complained: they were always glad to have the work to do. There was no "Hey wait a minute—that's not in my job description" you know. (Which used to be thrown up at me when I was a supervisor at the Switch.)

bc: You mentioned Scouting. That's a scouting picture up there. It's a beautiful photograph. Obviously, if it's still up on your wall, Scouting must have played a big role in your life?

JS: Oh it sure did! I was very much into that. I had a total of 38 years as a registered Scout. I had a Scout Master that lived to be 102 and he was a registered Scout until the day he died. He was probably the oldest registered Scout in the United States. My father talked Scouting to me as far back as I can remember 'cause he grew up in a little farm town where every boy had his own horse and they'd go out in the woods and camp. [My father] wanted me to have that experience of the out-of-doors. So, I did.

bc: Where were you born?

JS: Newark, New Jersey. My father worked for the Switch in their offices in New York City; and they moved to Swissvale 'bout three months before I was born; and my dad had to go with them. He left my mother at home. She gave birth to me. Three weeks later—I even have the date, it was a Friday, October the 30th—we moved to Swissvale. Wilkinsburg, actually. I grew up in Swissvale, Pittsburgh...five years in Swissvale, a few years in Wilkinsburg. (I've made a book—like this—of places where I've lived. [The book is titled Places Where I Lived: Newark, NJ; Wilkinsburg; Pittsburgh; Swissvale; Wilkinsburg; Forest Hills; Oakmont; Penn Hills.])

JS: You see that picture there? I got that from the Library of Congress. Now why am I so interested in the Brooklyn Bridge? You want to hear that story?

bc: Sure.

JS: My dad, as I said, worked for the Union Switch, and one of the jobs they got was to install the railroad signaling on the Brooklyn Bridge. [On one of his early days on the job] he mis-stepped. He was almost on his way over the edge of the bridge; and this big 250-pound, six-foot-six guy grabbed him and he just saved his life. And, of course, [my father] was quite grateful and friendly. As the months went by and it was getting into December, this man, whose name was Henry Stout, he said to my dad, I know you're from out-of-town.... He says, What you gonna do on Christmas? And my dad said, Well, I'll be in my boarding room; I'll read a book; I'll go down to the corner restaurant, get something to eat, take a walk, read a book. That's it. And this Harry Stout said, Wait 'til Monday. I think I have a better idea. So he came back to work on Monday. He says, You're invited to my parents' home for Christmas dinner. He said, I'm sure you'll enjoy the day because I have four unmarried sisters. [He laughs.] He eventually married one and that was my mother; and that's how they met.

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[JS presents the Library with a copy of his family history titled A Family History Questionnaire. Responses by J. H. S.] I made six of these for Christmas and gave them to all my grandsons and my son and my daughter. And I mailed one out to my granddaughter in California, who is a veterinarian, by the way....

bc: It says in here [in the Family History that you got a Merit Badge for bookbinding.

JS: The only Merit Badge in Scouting that seemed reasonable that I could get.... [You see] I had been a little physically-handicapped 'cause I had scarlet fever when I was twelve years old and the doctor wouldn't let me to do any swimming or gymnasium, anything like that...so, bookbinding appealed to me and they have Merit Badge pamphlets. They're supposed to teach you how to do these things. Well that pamphlet [on bookbinding] was useless to me so I went to Carnegie Library down in Oakland and I said to an attendant, I want every book that you have on bookbinding. Oh! they brought out a stack of books! I spent a whole day going through [them] and I picked out all the techniques that would make it simple; and I wrote it all up, made drawings 'cause I knew how to do mechanical drawings. I made the drawings so that you could understand how to do the sewing. I eventually got all [the information] into a pretty good article and sent it to the Boy Scout headquarters and they published it in the "Boys' Life." And then, later on, they made it into the Merit Badge pamphlet. That was an interesting experience 'cause I got correspondence from all over the country—little questions.

bc: Do you have your copy of "The Cremation of Sam McGee" [the poem by Robert Service] handy? that you bound. What you say in here [I read from JS's Family History]: "We usually bound magazines but, at times, created new books, both large and small. I made one that is about one inch by two inches and contains "The Cremation of Sam McGee.""

JS: I have that. [He searches for the book and continues to speak.] Yeah that was a challenge because our Scout troop was selected to do a Merit Badge. [JS hands me the diminutive book.] See, I had to put everything into it I could imagine that would be a challenge. [The poem itself within the binding is typed.] That typewriter was a 1934 Royal portable.

bc: This is nice. How old were you when you did this?

JS: Probably about 16 or 17. I found a bindery in Oakland on one of those streets that go between Forbes [Avenue] and Fifth [Avenue]. I visited them and just observed some of their techniques. I probably didn't use the proper materials. I used ordinary wood glue to bind the spine; and then I made my own paste out of corn starch with a drop or two of carbolic acid to keep the worms out, you know. That's one of the dangers facing books in a library, as you know—bookworms.

bc: You worked in Swissvale, but you lived in Wilkinsburg.

JS: Yes.

bc: Talk about the Wilkinsburg you remember.

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JS: The Wilkesburg I remember was a beautiful place. "The City of Churches." They had a church on every corner. I belonged to the Methodist Church there. They had so many nice stores in the downtown area—Wood [Street] and Penn [Avenue]. I met my wife at this Church. They used to have a Youth Meeting every Sunday night that would be over, maybe, eight or eight thirty. We'd walk up and down these streets, go to an ice cream place. There were good businesses there...Caldwell & Graham (the dry goods store located at the corner of Wood Street and Penn Avenue), dress shops, men's stores, three theaters were there. (Caldwell & Graham operated with one cashier who was located on the balcony. Sales clerks wrote sales slips which were put in little "buggies" or carriers along with the customer's cash and pushed into a constantly moving belt system to the cashier, who then made change and returned it to its origin.)

Everybody liked to walk.... Wood Street was actually made of wood—wood blocks. From Franklin, which was one end of Wood Street up to, I think, only as far as Penn Avenue, I can remember wood blocks on there. The houses were well-kept...but they were too close together. There weren't many yards around. I lived in an apartment, 409 Center Street, that had practically no yard. It was built on the back of another lot so that...actually it only had a little cement yard in the back. Center Street was one of the central streets going through the town—that's how it got its name.

All our friends, relatives—they all wanted to move to Wilkesburg. We lived in Swissvale five years before we moved to Wilkesburg. [In Swissvale] we were in an apartment that was actually a double duplex and we were on the upper floor. It was unbearably hot in the summer so we were glad to get a better apartment in Wilkesburg.

bc: You can see the old Wilkesburg when you walk through it. Charming community. Beautiful homes.

JS: I remember what is now known as "Blackridge".... Blackridge started as a real estate development on an area which was a garbage dump! I assume it was a part of Wilkesburg at that time. Today it is partly in Wilkesburg, Churchill, and Penn Hills. I remember up in that area [there were]...no structures...in fact, there was a little airport up there where Blackridge is now. It was very small; they had small planes. I don't know what their business was, but, in the early days, in the twenties and early thirties these little one-seater planes, two-seater planes...they'd take people up for sight-seeing trips...like over at Rodgers [Field]...that was quite a popular little airfield. I don't know whether they ever transported any merchandise or mail...probably no mail...but sight-seeing.

bc: Since you've retired, how do you keep busy?

JS: [He laughs.] Well, the day I retired, I made a nice tour out to see my son in California and spent a couple of weeks out there. After a month I went to my Church—I said, There's a lot of work to be done around here with maintenance; and I'm volunteering to do it. Eventually I got a crew of about eight men and we meet every Monday and do all kinds of repair work. The biggest job I got into was

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satisfying OSHA [Occupational Safety & Health Administration] 'cause we had a lot of public meetings in our Church and there was no provision for emergency lighting. "We need this, Jack." I'd never done anything like this...[except] around the house, you know.... Another fellow and I went out and bought all the emergency equipment we needed and I helped install it. In fact, Bill was my partner there and he was the manager of the building; he said, "Jack, I'll pull the power off of this while you work on this area. So I worked all through the area, got all the wiring done...everything put up...had to go through walls...and I came down to the end and I connected the last thing and the light was supposed to come on because there was no power, but it wouldn't come on. I said, "Hey, Bill, there's something wrong with this machine. Won't work. It won't come on...this light." And he said, "Wait a minute. Let me check something." And he went over to the master board. "Jack, I pulled the wrong plug: you were working with live wires." [He laughs strongly.] I said, Well God was with me that day. I spent a lot of time in the Church (South Avenue United Methodist Church in Wilkinsburg. That's on South Avenue and Mulberry).

[After I retired, my wife and I took trips.] We took a tour of Europe. We took a trip to Hawaii. We made about 15 trips to California: go out there for maybe a month at a time. We had relatives in Florida and, eventually, we'd spend the winters in Florida. In Florida mostly we'd go sight-seeing and loaf around, went fishing or something like that. I had no trouble being retired at all. [He chuckles.] We had a group of about 40 that would golf in the summer and bowl in the winter. This group of men I was in—they started out from a men's group in the Mifflin Avenue United Methodist Church. (Wilkinsburg had three other Methodist churches, namely: James Street, Ross Avenue and South Avenue.) [This group of men] called themselves the Social Security Athletic Club. Eventually they made me President of that.... We always had a nice annual banquet—invited all the widows and anybody that could come to the banquet. I'm the only survivor right now of that group. About two years ago the six of us that were survivors of another group, a similar group at the Edgewood Country Club—they had quite a large group—and we used to see them bowling in the same alley...so we merged. And now there's only six of us left. And I gave up bowling just two months ago....

We lived in Forest Hills for a while—40 some years. That's where I built my first house. I put windows in, helped put the roof on. I worked for the contractor. I worked on houses in Blackridge and Eastwood—wherever [the contractor] had a job.

bc: So you could trace this back to your saw when you were five-years-old. It all goes back to the saw. [JS laughs.]

JS: I don't know: that contractor, I think he put me on. He said, I want you to come out and cut all the 2x4's for this house he was building that day. He says, You're the only guy that can make a square cut. I think he was putting me on.

bc: Please talk about what you remember about Pittsburgh.

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JS: When we lived in Swissvale, the only way to get around was by street railways—Pittsburgh Railway Company. My dad liked to go downtown on Saturdays. I can remember early on we'd like to go down to the [Monongahela] wharf and there were still boats that would dock down there. Our favorite places, as far as stores were concerned, were Kaufmann's and Horne's. And, of course, we road the trolley; and, if we wanted to go from Kaufmann's to Horne's, you'd just get on the trolley and ride down—no fare—'cause they collected fares when you got off or when you got on out in the suburbs. No fares were collected downtown. But the biggest attraction down there was McCann's. (At the corner of Diamond and Stanwix.) They were a big food store down there. You'd buy shad roe, salt mackerel, oysters. And we'd buy them on Saturday—we always had an oyster stew for Saturday supper. And then, up on Diamond was the big Diamond Market—with the streets goin' through the middle of it. And then there was Donahoe's. (They had a nice dining room—as well as McCann's. They had a second floor. You could get a really good dinner up there for about a dollar...dollar-and-a-quarter...and that was a high price in those days.) Another favorite store was over on the North Side—Boggs and Buhl. They seemed to have things that my mother liked at Boggs and Buhl. Always go by trolley. But, some days, we used to go to the Swissvale station and go downtown on the train, and that required a little bit of walking downtown. We did a lot of traveling by train. Even when I worked downtown myself at Horne's, I always road the train from Wilkinsburg 'cause the train was coming every five or ten minutes and I tried to get the one that the last stop was Homewood and then it would go non-stop into Pittsburgh, skipping Roup and East Liberty.... Roup was for local trains only and I used it when attending Pitt. (By the way my wife's grandfather was the Master Carpenter on the local division of the Pennsylvania Railroad which extended to Altoona; and Roup was one of the stations he worked on as well as Union Depot in downtown Pittsburgh. My mother-in-law was the daughter of Alden J. Thompson, the carpenter. Accidentally he knocked his tool box off a double brick and tile wall while working at the Union site. The box fell into the space beyond his reach and remains there to this day!)

When I'd walk down Penn Avenue, some days it'd be so smoky, I had to wear a shirt with a detachable collar because, by the time I got to Horne's, I'd have soot streaks on my collar. And, if any employee would walk through the store with a dirty collar, he was in trouble...so we wore detachable collars and put them on when we got to the store. That's how dirty it was. [With all the smoke pollution] we experienced [darkness at noon].

I think you could even board a train [at the Wilkinsburg train station] for Philadelphia or Harrisburg.... We would always go to the East Liberty station when we would travel to my dad's relatives in Ohio. And we often went to New Jersey to visit my mother's relatives. We always went to East Liberty to get on the train. Travel by train is so great. I took that train across Canada one time. That's quite a trip. We used to have so many trains [he says wistfully.]

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When I lived in Wilksburg, some Sundays, a friend of mine and I used to go walking. So we'd walk from Wilksburg to Mount Washington, down through Oakland, down through Schenley Park, down the Boulevard [of the Allies], and I'd take panoramic pictures of Pittsburgh. Just my little Kodak: I'd take this [snapshot]; I'd move; take that [snapshot; I'd move]....

[JS concludes the interview by our browsing through his Family History. He shows me a photograph.] Here's my little incident on the Westinghouse Bridge. I'm one of those Boy Scouts. (I don't know which one.)

bc: What is everyone doing with the ropes?

JS: This is the day it was dedicated. We had it roped off for the parade.

bc: You have a ton of Merit Badges, don't you?

JS: I never made Eagle [Scout] although I got all the required Merit Badges. I was too old. Now that's an article copied out of this magazine that I subscribe to—"Invention and Technology"—because I made one of those kites. And [as part of the magazine article] that's one of the first aerial pictures taken of the San Francisco earthquake [taken from a kite].

bc: In our collection at the Pennsylvania Department at the Library we have photographs of The Point taken from a kite in, I believe, the first decade of the twentieth century....

JS: [My idea was to build one of those kites and put a camera up over Wilksburg.] When I was about 14 or 15.m [but] I couldn't figure out how to set the camera off.