

Marvin Jones

Hillsborough Remembers

Marvin Jones was fifteen years old when World War II began. When he graduated from high school, he was very disappointed that he could not join the service because of a disability. So he went to work for the Post Office, helping to bring the mail to families of boys overseas.

He tells of life during the Depression, shares boyhood memories of playing Tarzan, riding bikes, and swimming in the Hillsborough River.

WWII
At Home & Abroad

On Monday, November 22, 1999, I, Eunita Williams (**EW**), will be conducting an interview with Mr. Marvin Jones (**MJ**) at the Seminole Heights Library and this interview will discuss topics of family life and school.

[recorder was turned off and back on]

Eunita Williams: Let's begin this interview by me asking you what was life like during the war?

Marvin Jones: Well, as a boy of, uh, fifteen years, sixteen years old and the war in Europe started and uh, it upset the whole country, and our way of living and what we could do, the boys going into the service, your friends. It was hard for us to comprehend what the war was all about. It didn't affect me personally too much because I stayed home. And um, I had one brother and two sisters. And uh, we did a lot of volunteer work with the Methodist Church. My sisters was with the uh, they entertained at the USO clubs. Went into the post office with my handicap since I couldn't get into the service. They was doubtful that I could pull my weight but I proved to 'em that a handicapped person—it didn't make any difference—they could still do the job.

EW: Um hmm.

MJ: The boys that were clerks and carriers that were workmen, was called into the service and that put a burden on us because we had to work just a little bit harder to get the mail out. And that was a first priority—getting the mail to the boys in the service. The life at home didn't change too much. Mother and dad, dad worked at the Seaboard railroad and mother stayed home and "housewifed." She kept the house up and did uh, helped us with our schoolwork and so on and so forth. But they ruled the roost. We had curfews

we had to abide by. We couldn't, at night-time the lights, all the windows in the house had to have blackout curtains. The automobile headlights had to be blacked out half way.

We had block wardens that went around the block all during the night, making sure no lights were showing or anything. Then we'd come into buying gasoline for the automobiles was scarce and everybody had to have a certain type of sticker that goes on the windshield of the car. Well, my mother was uh, Red Cross and workin' with the Red Cross, and the church work. My dad was a railroad man. He had a "T" ticket, which allowed him to buy more gasoline than somebody who had an "A ticket." Of course, you could buy gas on the black market but it cost two dollars and twenty-five cents for—er, fifty cents for a gallon of gasoline, compared to thirty cents otherwise. [laughter]

EW: [Laughter] Okay, you mention you had a brother and two sisters. Was your brother drafted into the military?

Marvin Jones: Um, he signed up to go volunteer to go into the service. He was drafted but he got an extension because he was taking an air-condition refrigeration course with General Electric. He was almost finished with that so the draft board uh, deferred him. After he graduated from GT and E, then he went into the service. And got into air-conditioning...I mean a refrigeration outfit to supplied fresh foods to the soldiers out on the field.

EW: Okay, um, I know that there were factors that hindered you from entering the military. How did this affect you personally? Were you upset?

Marvin Jones: Oh yes, I was very, very upset when that doctor told me I

was "Four F." They had three classifications: "One A" which was, you automatically went in; then you have "One B" and that was limited service—and that was what they put me into first, "One B." And then when I went into my last interview, the physical interview, the doctors turned me down and put me into "Four F" and that's how I got into the post office.

EW: Okay, you mentioned how your mother helped you and your siblings with your homework and your school studies. UM, when the war erupted, were there any--did the curriculum alter?

Marvin Jones: No. Uh, the school system... Of course, some of the teachers had to go and they'd fill them in with substitute teachers. And uh, the teacher's pay was at the bottom of the list. They made less than the post office employees and we was making sixty-five cents an hour. (laughter)

EW: Times have changed.

Marvin Jones: And nurses were the same way. They had uh, they were on the low part of the pay scale but that was—we were just coming out of the Depression, which was really awful. Of course, the Depression started in 1929 when the banks and the stock market closed -- went bankrupt. And uh, President Hoover and his cabinet and everything, didn't know how to deal with it. It was something that, just a complete breakdown of the federal government.

EW: So, there was a lot of corruptness in the air, pretty much—due to this stock market.

MJ: Right. Jobs were real scarce. A couple of the factories were, uh, getting worse. The factories couldn't sell their products, so they closed down. And uh, people were out of

work and uh, the uh, bread lines... We were kind of lucky because we moved to where I'm living now and daddy said, "Well, what we can do, we are going to buy us a cow." So, he bought a cow for ten dollars and we had about three gallons of milk a day from that cow (laughter) and that kept us going.

And Daddy had, was a farmer and Mother was a farmer. She could grow anything, and so we had our garden, and uh, our vegetables, chickens, ducks, and turkeys where we were livin'. And uh, so we had it pretty good. (laughter) We didn't, we weren't starving but we helped the neighborhood out with food. Boys and girls would come up to neighbors and friends and say, wonder if they could have a couple of tomatoes or, so on and so forth.

EW: Since you're talking about economics now, um, can you go in detail about the rations?

MJ: The policy of what?

EW: The rations - the little coupons that you...

MJ: You mean race...

EW: No, about the ration book.

MJ: Oh! The ration book.

EW: The ration book, sorry.

MJ: The ration books was a necessary evil. If you didn't, people would go to the store and they would hoard food and buy more than they needed and so on and so forth. And uh, hey found out during—over in Europe and England that they, 'cause they had it way before we did. And uh, so, this was a way to stop hoarding food and commodities, clothes, and so forth.

EW: So was the policy effective?

MJ: No, because Mother and Daddy would only buy the necessary things. If we needed a pair of pants, they would go down and buy just one pair of pants. And clothes -- we had our regular clothes, our Sunday clothes. Where in school, we'd wear our jeans and most of us would wear long-sleeved shirts at that time. But uh, [pause] there wasn't any conflict between going to school and the classes. The only thing is that we had segregated schools. In our school, we had a group that graduated in January, a group graduated in June. If your birthday falls between April and November, you started in September; from November through March, then you started in January and there was always a group graduating.

EW: So um, you were about fifteen or sixteen during the whole war thing---

MJ: Uh huh.

EW: What was war like to you? Did it appear to be this appealing thing? Or how did the government present it among your peers?

MJ: Well, you got to remember that our news came over the radio. And uh, it, they had the news broadcast. If I can remember correctly, around eight-thirty or nine o'clock at night, they would have a broadcast from the battlefield or from Europe. And uh, would tell about some of the battles that had been fought that day or if a general got killed, or so on and so forth. Then over in the Pacific, they kept us up to date on MacArthur going from, leaving the Philippines to go down to Australia to start building the American soldiers up again.

And uh, then start a hopping from island to island to bring Japan under control—and of course the newspapers

had a list of deaths of the boys on the West Coast of Florida. Tribune, and the Tampa Daily Times, St. Petersburg paper, Clearwater and all like that, all the newspapers. They kept pretty well of the activities that were going on. It was not like the Korean War or Vietnam, where the television newscast was actually filmed right on, out on the battlefield and you could watch it right on television. But uh, the uh, the keeping track of it was kind of interesting, especially General Patton going in North Africa and then episodes of the battles in goin' Italy, and then into France, and how you got dressed down by Eisenhower, slappin' that soldier in that field hospital. Buy, uh....

EW: In regards to this war, were there any social issues escalating around the environment or around society as a whole?

MJ: No. Environmentally, it's not like it is today, because we didn't have a water problem. Wasn't that many people. Pollution of the water - we never thought about it, because I used to swim in the Hillsborough River right there on the end of Osborne and they had a sewer line, dumped the sewerage right into the river there. And we used to catch fish right there - mullet on a hook and line.

EW: Oh! That's good. [laughter]

MJ: One little incident, there was a, I was a football manager at Hillsborough High School, a student football manager. I saw a flashman comes up one day. He had a fishing column in the Tampa Daily Times and he wanted to know if anybody knew how to catch a mullet on a hook and line so I sent him down there. And says, "You watch them and the color folks down there. Then a couple days later he said, "Now I know how to catch a mullet on a hook and line." [laughter]

EW: So you mentioned fishing and swimming and I know that one of your hobbies now is to collect items. When the war was around—or as a teenager, what were some of your leisure activities?

MJ: Well, we played Tarzan. Tarzan was in the 30's and uh, Johnny Weismuller. We had a vacant lot with about eighteen oak trees around it and we used to climb up in there and make swings and go from one tree to another and have fights [laughter]. It was, to us, it was a lot of fun.

EW: So it seems like the way you talk, that war was, that war didn't change much.

MJ: No, war...

EW: It was happy times.

MJ: Yeah.

EW: Were people, were some people frightened or panicked and decided to migrate somewhere else?

MJ: They migrated for one reason: better jobs. Because the South was not prepared for any kind of big business. Factories were all up north, where you're raw materials were and they were hiring. When the war came up in Europe, and the factories started manufacturing the tanks and the ammunition, and the guns and all like that, the airplanes, battleships, warships, uh, submarines. So those types of businesses were all up North. There wasn't any down here. Now we did have Tampa Shipbuilding Company and they finally got some contracts to build freighters. And then we come into another company that's down here on — the McClosky Shipping Company down on 54th. Now, they made concrete barges. These concrete barges served two purposes. Once they were built and left Tampa, then

they would load up food and all kinds of war material and everything, and shipped over to England. And then, on the invasion, they was used to go out and then they would sink them and use those for docks for, to throw the docks on top of them to get into France. And so they, they were concrete barges.

EW: Earlier in the interview, you spoke of your family helping out the community. Was it a neighboring thing, just a bond created among...?

MJ: Well, of course, the families being out of work and all like that and we had our cow and then Dad and Mother bought another cow, so that made two. We weren't supposed to give the milk away because it wasn't pasteurized or anything like that. But they'd come up and said they needed, they haven't had anything to eat or anything like that. They'd bring a container and mother would pour some milk into it and let them take it home. Of course, it wasn't supposed to be done, but... (laughter).

EW: Did you have a lot of friends in school?

MJ: Oh yes.

EW: And were these friends as fortunate as you and your family or did they really have a lot of struggle?

MJ: Well, uh, some of them had it real, real hard because their folks didn't have a job, couldn't get work. But the federal government had a work program, the WPA. And uh, they would send these people out on roadways, buildin' parks, beautifyin' the road system, plantin' trees. They'd teach them how to weld and go to shipyards. This was all over the country. And uh, when the war broke out, of course, the WPA went out of business. We also had another group,

what they called the CCC camp. Conservation, uh, and they also did a lot of work in the public parks like the Hillsborough State Park, the Everglades National Park, Ocala National Park. And they were building trailers and things like this.

They also went to school and learned radio, how to build a radio from scratch, telegraph communications. Mothers and the women learned how to sew. It was a federal government-sponsored thing. And uh, that helped a lot. The bread lines: two or three hundred people would be lined up to get a loaf of bread or a bowl of soup, or something like that. It was rough—rough then, in the 30s. But to say, hated to see it but when Hitler start building up his German army, England woke up to the fact, “hey, we have to do the same thing” and that’s when the orders started going in, from overseas to American manufacturers to produce clothes and other things. The farmers got into it because they needed the food. I remember one day they brought in four or five big semis and stacked down in the basement of the post office downtown, boxes and boxes of all kinds of stuff, in case of an emergency of a air raid. Then they would have them to be distributed. Since we didn’t have any air raids or anything like that, they moved them out and sent them overseas.

EW: The war seemed to be this depressed, distraught, and distressed little era. Um, after the war era ended, how long did it take for the environment to regain its status again?

MJ: Well, of course, the men that were working in factories and everything like that, in the post office and other branches of government, state government, city government, when they come back, the job was theirs. We were just hired temporarily for the duration of the war. Six months after

the war was over, then we were out of a job. Some places, they hired the... If the person wanted to go back to that job, then it's there for 'em. If they don't want to come back, then they would find something else and a lot of them did that. A lot of my friends didn't come back to Tampa. They stayed out west or in New York, wherever they were in debarkation point. So we got scattered [laughter].

EW: By---I only hear this history second-hand, or handed down from generation to generation---by you actually experiencing the whole war atmosphere, um, does it impact your life differently?

MJ: [pause] It didn't affect me that much. Of course, I lost some good friends in the service. But uh, we never thought about race conflicts or anything like that. We lived in our neighborhood. Everybody lived in their own little neighborhood. Everybody got along fine [laughter]. But the war changed it and for me it changed for the better, because we uh, race relationships, boys and girls started mingling with each other in the war in the service and they came back. And I can remember going to Kress's downtown. They had a water fountain: Whites only, Blacks only. Union Station, the train station, was the same way. Everybody who had stores and had water fountains, you had White and you had Black.

EW: Yeah, that lasted for awhile. But is one event, place, person or anything that you won't forget about the war?

MJ: Well, I liked... [END OF TAPE 1, SIDE A] [START OF TAPE 1, SIDE B]

MJ: ...being a football manager, I had a lot of fun in school [laughter]. I was a cutup.

EW: So, what did you teenagers do for fun? Like, did you all, was there one hangout?

MJ: We had uh, well, we had Faver's, that was up on Florida Avenue. And uh, well, anyway, south of Indiana, had a great big root beer barrel around it. And uh, that was one of our hangouts. We had the Seminole Theatre down here on the corner of Osborne and Florida Avenue.

EW: Oh, that's now gone.

MJ: I mean Wilder and Florida.

EW: Oh okay.

MJ: ...which is now a church. We used to get in for a dime. We could stay in there all day until six o'clock, then it went up to a quarter. (laughter)

EW: But you had to be home by dark anyway.

MJ: We had our bicycles and we could go anywhere, practically anywhere we wanted to. Dad restricted us, so... We had to be home by a certain time. But uh, we peddled our way around, or walked. Lowry Park was just built but its nothing like it is now.

EW:EW: Yeah, times have changed.

MJ: We caught butterflies in the park and made trays out of them, and so on and so forth. We got the pine needle and weaved and learned how to cut the glass and put the glass on top of it. (laughter)

EW: So what would you say is the biggest change from now till then?

MJ: Now, today to then...is the fast lane that we're living in, 'cause then back in Florida, you just took it easy. You just, was a little, Tampa was

nothing but a little old two-horse country town. And you just took life easy. There was never any big rush, or any hurry of any kind. You had your streetcars and that was a lot of fun to ride. [laughter] You could take a nickel from Sulphur Springs to Downtown, and then a dime from downtown out to Port Tampa, stop on the way to Ballast Point. But the streetcars were a lot of fun to ride. But then, of course, they built a putt-putt golf course around Sulphur Springs. And uh, we used to play carpet golf, that was what it was called carpet golf. Then the drive-in theatres come in. We had three or four we could go to. Now we only have one left now out of about fifteen that used to be around town.

EW: That's Fun-Land.

MJ: Yeah.

EW: On Hillsborough. If you could have one object of paraphernalia from the war today, what would that object be?

MJ: [Pause] Say that again now.

EW: If you could have one object from the war that doesn't exist today, what would that object be?

MJ: One object...

EW: Or is there any?

MJ: [Pause] Down the banks of the Hillsborough River, where the Hillsborough Avenue bridge is, they used to bring in the British Honduras cedar trees, logs. They was anywheres from forty to sixty feet long. And uh, they lapped 'em up in the river and we played on those. Then they would stack them up on the side of the river and then cut 'em up into six lengths, truck 'em to the Tampa Box Factory. They made regular real cigar boxes out of them. Well, we used to play on

those logs, because they would throw 'em on there, pick 'em up out of the river with a crane and they would just throw them any which way and make caves underneath them and we'd play Caveman and all like that. It was a lot of fun.

It was dangerous because if one ever start rolling, just, like, out at Texas was last week, at the A&M University, big bonfire, one log let loose, burnt that... Of course, that was one of our main things. Of course, the city of Tampa didn't have the playgrounds like they have now. And uh, that was another thing that you boys and girls have, because they are all over the city. There's not a community that doesn't have a playground.

And of course, we had our gangs that we ganged up on too, called the Toilet Bowl gang. It was a big field in front of my house was a vacant lot. The City didn't own it. They own it now, and it's the () Miller Playground, but we made our own little ballpark there, our football field, our baseball field. There was the Rose Bowl, the Cotton Bowl, the Sugar Bowl, the Orange Bowl and the Toilet Bowl. [laughter] And up by the river, farther up around from Sulphur Springs, east of Sulphur Springs, they had the River Rats Club.

EW: That sounds like a nice club though.

MJ: Some of them people that belong with them, I can name one right off the bat and that was John Griffin. We call him "Jack" and he got to be a county judge.

EW: [laughter] So would you say that family life during the war was a time for unity?

MJ: Right. We all looked after each other. In other words, we consoled each other when one of our friends got

killed and we heard about it. And uh, we were, my class, the class of forty-two, of course, we were all, the next morning after we heard about Pearl Harbor---Monday morning--- and uh, it was unbelievable that we would, people would ask fellow members of our class. We didn't know them personally, but they would come up and start talking. We kept in contact, even today, which was sixty years ago; we're still in contact with our class members.

EW: I think that is something that has changed now too. It's like after graduation, "I will never see you again." [laughter] So, some believe the idea that history repeats itself. Would you agree or disagree with that statement?

MJ: Uh...in a way, yes. They, uh, it seems like they never learn. The politicians, the people that run the country, uh, they never learn that, "Hey! There is a different, a better way to live besides fightin'" but they have never figured out "why." [laughter] They think that you got to fight to gain your territory or so on and so forth. And these idiots, get in their minds that "Hey, we can conquer the world." [laughter] Well, who wants to conquer the world? [laughter]

EW: So, if history were to repeat itself, what would be some pro's and con's of what the world may come to?

MJ: In today's world, with the technology, it's just mind-bogglin', what's going to come up in the twenty-first century. Back in the 30s, we used to read funny, the comic books: Flash Gordon and uh, Batman and uh, Little Orphan Annie and those, and, uh, Flash Gordon would fly around in space and Dick Tracy with his two, uh, with his wrist radio. But, progress, and coming up now, computers--

EW: Taking over the world.

MJ: It's just, you just can't visualize, visually, what's going to happen. You're going to find, in my own opinion, later on in the century, you're going to be flying up to Mars and you're going to be living on Mars; you goin' be livin' on the moon; you're goin' be livin' everywhere.

EW: So, what were some of the advantages of the war that you'll like to see implemented into today's society?

MJ: First thing I would love to see, and that is, everybody being brothers and sisters to everybody. Forget about this racial relationship: uh, black and white and green and gray and everything else. We're all brothers and sisters; we're all human bein's. And the minute they talk about relations...Hey! I got the one of the worst beatings of my life, fighting a little black boy.

My uncle up in Oviedo, Florida, which is northeast of Orlando, he had five big celery farms. On one farm he had nothing, he raised nothing but hay. The last half-acre, he'd get on his mower with his mule and mow back and rabbits would go out this way, that way, every which way. All of his colored help would be standing around, stopping rabbits over the hedge. Well, this little bunny came bouncing out and that was mine. [laughter] This little colored boy went after it the same time and we got there. Started arguing with the boy and we got into a little fistfight. My uncle stopped that tractor and he got out. He picked me up by the collar and he went "Slap! Slap! Slap! Slap!" and he says, "I don't want to ever see you fighting with one of my colored help." He said, "That rabbit was just as much that boy's as it was yours, and he got there first."

EW: Well...interesting.

MJ: That's when I learned to respect the colored race, and today is the same way. -I respect them right to the ground they walk on. In fact, I got one that she's almost ninety years old, that used to come in the house and work for us for fifty cents a day to do the ironing, the six of us: mother, dad, the two sisters, brother, and myself, for fifty cents she did all that. I see Katie about every three months and take her a couple of mullet; some shrimp, and sit and talk with her. We was raised with colored people and we respected them. If you get respect from anybody then you got friends for the rest of your life.

EW: I agree. Well, um, at this moment I suppose the interview is now at a closure but I'll just like to personally thank you for your time, your dedication, and your devotion for assisting in our project.

MJ: Well, you're quite welcome.

[END OF INTERVIEW]