

**Oral History Interview of
Lamar Jones**

**Interviewed by: Daniel Sanchez
November 18, 2014
Lubbock, Texas**

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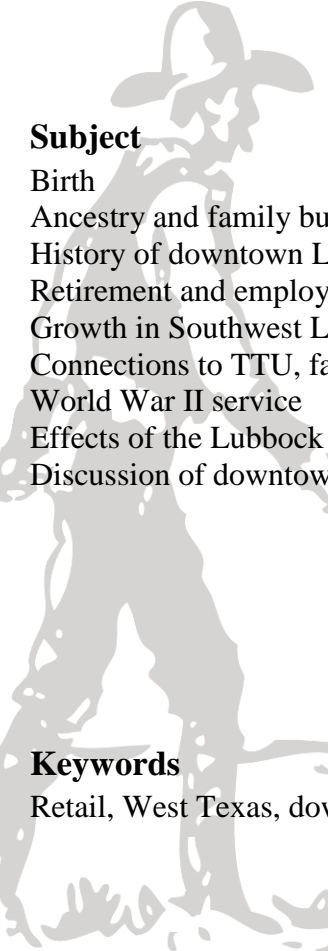
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Transcript Overview:

This interview features Lamar Jones, who discusses his upbringing, his experiences as a retailer and citizen in West Texas, and the effects of the Lubbock tornado.

Length of Interview: 00:27:11



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Discussion of downtown Lubbock renovation, local organizations, roads	11	00:21:33

Keywords

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Daniel Sanchez (DS):

My name is Daniel Sanchez, today's date is November 18, 2014, we're in Lubbock, Texas at the home of Lamar Jones. Lamar, thank you very much for being here today.

Lamar Jones (LJ):

You're welcome.

DS:

Or actually for inviting me into your house today.

LJ:

Thank you.

DS:

Let's start off with your complete legal name.

LJ:

Lamar Jones, that's all I've got, they didn't give me a middle one.

DS:

They didn't give you a middle name?

LJ:

No.

DS:

Let's state your date of birth.

LJ:

December 3, 1926.

DS:

And place of birth.

LJ:

Bokchito, Oklahoma. Mothers used to go back to their daughters, daughters used to go back to their mothers to have their children, and I was born in Bokchito, Oklahoma; my grandparents were there at the time. Primarily grew up in Plainview and then moved to Lubbock in 1954.

DS:

Well, let's talk a little bit about your early years, let's talk about your parent's names and where they were from, and your grandparent's same thing with them.

LJ:

Well, my dad was Willis Anthony Jones, called W. A. Jones, born in 1899 in Paris, Texas and my mother Dorothy Bradshaw out of Bokchito, Oklahoma where they kind of ended up there and she was born in 1899, both of them; and my dad was 1899. And then, of course, they came to the plains in about 1928 or '29 in Plainview, and then my grandparent's on one side was merchants, really the fourth generation of merchants in the family—and the last one, probably—and they started out in Arkansas in department stores and then my granddad was in department stores in Bokchito, and then my dad had store at one time in the early thirties in Plainview, Dimmitt, Bovina and Sudan and was out of those in about 1934, '35. And then we had stores in Plainview. We had a lady-style shop, medium-to-better goods, a men's style shop and better goods and a Plainview Mercantile which was a department store and that's where I started. Management was in Plainview Mercantile about 1946, and then ended up with a store here and had one in Lubbock and it was called The Vogue, and my dad bought it in about 1944 probably, and then, of course I was in business, and my dad had moved, after about twenty-five years on the plains, he moved to Salem, Oregon and we still had three stores in West Texas. The one in Lubbock, and then the lady-style shop in Plainview, and the Plainview Mercantile, and then that worked out until I had just this store here—The Vogue, in Lubbock—and then we put in another store. For about the last eighteen years we were in on 2012 34th. We were on downtown Broadway, 1016 Broadway, for a number of years, we were around that corner in several locations and we retired in about 1997.

DS:

Do you want to talk a little bit about Lubbock and the growth that you have seen as a merchant from the time you started your first business until you closed down your last one?

LJ:

Well, when I first came in—well in 1954 when I took the store, and it was quite active downtown, you couldn't get a parking place. There was—we were ladies' ready wear, medium to better, and there were three other ladies ready-to-wear in the downtown area in about the same price range as we were in, and I think there were probably about fifteen to sixteen ladies' ready-to-wear stores in that price range in town at the time. And very active downtown—Hemphill-Wells was downtown, Hannah Pope, Dunlaps, of course [J.C.] Penney's and [Montgomery] Ward's, so it was a pretty active place and then it gradual—they put in stores, shopping centers and everything and it just kind of—the thing about it, not no place for independence, they just gradually—I was probably one of the last independents that was in at that time; that was still in in 1997 and then I retired and so most of them had already been out probably for several reasons.

One of them is the age proposition, most of them would have been retirement age by that time, and no one really wanted to take over the stores, and so that's pretty well where the town was gradually worked down—Levines is about the only retail in downtown Lubbock.

DS:

Well, and they have actually already closed. That building is empty now.

LJ:

Have they closed that store?

DS:

I walked by it the other day.

LJ:

I wasn't aware that they had closed it, but they were in a long time and they weren't in my price range but they—I knew them just for meeting them and such. And, of course, I was in the Downtown Association at one time, which there was about probably ten or twelve people on the meetings for downtown Lubbock. That pretty well I think—

DS:

Well you mentioned, you know, you called it “independence,” how hard was it—how did it change for the independents for the early days to nowadays where all the major companies have taken over?

LJ:

Well, of course, I guess in the sixties and seventies it was, I don't know if you would say any tougher or anything, but it just was business, and we had such a large charge, and we'd been in so long, and that really just kind of, just was kind of reasonably retired, it was just kind of time to retire. And plus the fact that it's the hours that it took, which we were open six days a week—and just a few things that made us retire. We enjoyed our business but we enjoyed our customers, but the hours was again getting to us and we decided to retire. We had the two stores at the time.

DS:

And speak about how many employees you had.

LJ:

Well, we had about four to five people in the two stores, two to five people in each store from three to five people in each store, five people. Now, of course, at one time we had as many as six but things kind of changed a little bit where you didn't have to have as much personnel. It was

that volume went down it was just kind of the way that sales went, they didn't take as many sales people.

DS:

See, I was thinking that because you were open so many hours, you might need a bigger staff but you really didn't?

LJ:

Well, we worked some part time, and some retired people, so it worked out that part of them worked some hours and some of them—of course, they couldn't work but forty hours and some of them worked probably just one or two days a week, and we used quite a bit of retired people and actually in those stores when they were—the store on 34th Street was in about eighteen years of our last eighteen, and the wife ran that one and I pretty well ran the one downtown, but we crossed a lot.

DS:

How did the growth in southwest Lubbock affect your stores?

LJ:

Oh well, that's pretty hard to answer, because it did move away from downtown, it took the amount of traffic, in other words, we got to where we had to pretty well pull our traffic because Hemphill Wells went out, Hannah Pope went out, Bentley's, Skybell's moved out to the suburbs. I don't know, it's pretty hard to say, it just made such a gradual—but as far as the year that the mall went in, we had pretty well complete—we had juniors' and ladies'—and the year that the mall went in, we lost our junior business, they went to the mall. But that year we had an increase in volume because they pulled people in from the surrounding territory, and one of the odd things is that we catered to women and at that time it was difficult for them to find clothes that were kind of way out, so they would end up coming to us, so it really helped our business when the mall went in. And that was kind of the way it was until we retired. We had kind of a niche of womens' and even Tech girls, when they graduated and needed to go get a dress or suit to go interview with, why, they'd come to us; and we had generations of people that had traded with us.

DS:

You mentioned Tech and you said that your family had a strong connection to Tech?

LJ:

Well, just from the daughters, but now business-wise, we got some of the teachers and such; but the juniors, the Tech students, we didn't get much of that. Now, of course, it helped out and put people in town and everything, but that wasn't our—the students at Tech were not the ones that

we did business with.

DS:

A little older crowd?

LJ:

A little older; teachers, businesswomen, just probably fifty up; and we had those, had a lot of good customers in that group, and a lot of those had been with us for years and we had a lot of the territory. We got customers from all over; we had some customers from some of the small towns that when my dad was in Dimmit they traded with him there, and then traded with him in Plainview, and then traded with us in Lubbock so we had customers all over West Texas, which helped us stay in.

DS:

And you mentioned that it was a family, you were what, the fourth generation? What was the first store that went in by one of your ancestor's?

LJ:

Now the year I don't know. It was my great, great granddad that went in, in Clinton, Arkansas, and then, oh, it had been just my great granddad went in, in Clinton, Arkansas, and then my granddad went in and ended up in Bokchito, Oklahoma, and then my dad was primarily in Plainview, and then I was primarily in Lubbock.

DS:

The same type of store or different type?

LJ:

Well, no, it graduated from my great granddad had several like hard-ware stores, a lumber yard, a drug store. My granddad just had groceries and department store and my dad was in department stores and then we graduated in to specialty shops so we kind of changed around. Very little was handed down, my dad, I did get handed down some from my dad, had help when I bought the store here from him, but otherwise I think each other one pretty well started on their own.

DS:

It was just the trade that y'all liked to be independent and start stores I guess?

LJ:

Well, it was just one of those things that developed.

DS:

You know you mentioned early on about you were in school and you were in college one year and then you went off to the service?

LJ:

Yes, I was in the Merchant Marines. I joined in 1944 and served for two years in the Merchant Marines. I was one of the youngest World War II vets, there's just a few born in—I was born in 1926, there's just a few in 1927 that was in World War II, so most of the vets that you run into from World War II are much older and working down pretty fast. So many of my friends, of course, are gone.

DS:

Would you mind talking about that experience, about those two years?

LJ:

I was just sailing in the Atlantic and got in on the end of the war, and didn't really, just like sailed in the Atlantic and the Caribbean some, and it was not too hard of a duty, I just missed the Pacific, that's where all the action was, but you just went where they sent you and it wasn't anything spectacular or anything, except they were two T-2 Tankers and, of course, actually the U-boats were pretty well out of the picture later on, but there were still some mines floating around and we were carrying high octane gasoline so if you hit one you were gone, but it wasn't too bad of duty, I spent two years.

DS:

So were those two years—when those two years were up and you came back to the U. S. did you come back to West Texas?

LJ:

Yes, as I grew up my family was still in Plainview and we still had the three stores there at Plainview and then the one in Lubbock and then I started managing the department store when I was eighteen, I came back—I take it back, nineteen, just before I turned twenty. And then I was with it for about two years, and then when we still had the three stores, at one time I was general manager and then just bought this store in Lubbock.

DS:

You mentioned that you were downtown, did the store get affected at all by the tornado in 1970?

LJ:

(laughs) Yeah. The tornado hit the downtown area fairly hard, but on my store we didn't get too much damage, it knocked all the windows out and messed up some of the models, but it didn't

get inside the store at all. But I went down the next day, and we had remodeled the downtown store at one time, we put the windows we had bought from Pittsburgh Plate Glass, and he was down there taking orders, and so we were some of the first ones to get ours back in because we had done business with him before, but we were fortunate, very little damage.

DS:

So probably some debris hit your windows and busted them out?

LJ:

Oh yeah, well, the tornado more or less swirled out, and Levines was over across the street from us, and it must have swirled over and kind of raised up and blew the rocks and gravel and all back into my store on the front and the windows, that's what got the windows and messed up what was inside, but it wasn't a whole lot of damage. Evidently it was rising up as it went over, but the downtown really was a mess.

DS:

How did that impact your foot traffic?

LJ:

Very little, in fact, it actually, I can't say, but it put some money back into Lubbock, our volume stayed pretty steady and our volume stayed pretty steady for all the years, it just helped it, I'm sure, stay steady. It put some money in the town and that's kind of odd to say, that the tornado kind of helped your business, but actually it—insurance money came in and they had a lot of building going on, so it did help us out. I don't remember I just know that our volume, it really didn't affect our volume very much.

DS:

So I think it also coincided with that growth spurt for Lubbock right afterwards, that's part of the rebuilding.

LJ:

Oh yeah, the rebuilding and the money and the insurance and the people coming in with the building so—

DS:

So what do you think about the plans to renovate downtown Lubbock now?

LJ:

Well, I wish you a lot of luck on it. I don't know what it will finally come out of it, but they seem to be rather—they think it will help and I'm sure that it will. I think that it's quite an undertaking.

I was on the downtown—I was Vice President one time on the Downtown Association back when there was quite a few business in town and everything before they started moving out, and we did a lot of things to try to create traffic and such—and some of them worked and some of them didn't, and so they're back to kind of where they were, except a little different approach.

DS:

Could you tell us about some of the ideas that y'all had, that y'all tried?

LJ:

Well they did pull a Ferris wheel in one time and set it up and they had special promotions and such and then they started opening until nine o' clock at night on I believe it was Tuesday night and that helped a little for a while but it didn't stay for too long, but promotions did help some the merchants did buy into it pretty well.

DS:

And how long ago was that that you were the Vice President of that association?

LJ:

I was Vice President of the Downtown Association for probably a couple of years, it wasn't—we just met about once a week and there were about twelve or fourteen members and just discussed what we could do to keep it. And there were a lot of nice people we worked with.

DS:

Were y'all involved with the Chamber of Commerce back then?

LJ:

We were members of the Chambers of Commerce, yes, for a lot of years and went to some of the meeting but weren't too very involved with the Chamber of Commerce. Well, I think that pretty well probably—

DS:

I was going to say do you have any final thoughts on the story?

LJ:

Well, I would like to put maybe one thing in that you maybe have not run into. My dad had stores in Plainview and Dimmit and Bovina and Sudan, and actually I guess in the mid—throughout 1934, the stores started closing them out in those towns, volume went down in those small towns, businesses went out and I think—I used to—I was fourteen when I learned how to drive and there wasn't—he went from Plainview to Dimmitt to Bovina to Sudan and back to Plainview about two or three times a week and I went with him and drive some, that's where I

learned how to drive and the only paved road was inside Dimmitt at the time. And I think the thing that probably hurt the small towns more than anything else was when they put the pavements in that drew the people in. The cars got better and the pavement and they just started coming to, well like, Plainview was pretty good for size at that time and then the small towns just started going down and of course, there's not much left in the business except at Levelland where they have the college; they still have some retail there I think, but the rest of them are struggling pretty good and I think that was one of the things that caused the small towns businesses to go down.

DS:

People had more options to go elsewhere?

LJ:

Well, yes, the roads, you know, back they—they used to just—the towns are probably about twelve or fifteen miles within reach of one another and that was when you had wagons and from the farm they would take a day to get into town and a day, you know, the time to get home, and the wagons could cover about that much area. And then as the roads got better and the cars got better and such why they gradually spread out and went to the bigger towns.

DS:

You mention all those different stores, did y'all keep y'all's business records?

LJ:

No, don't have.

DS:

Because I was talking about those earlier collections, some of those more valuable ones are where you have someone's business records, the day to day activities and stuff like that.

LJ:

We don't have the—nothing on the records. I believe that's about all.

DS:

I think it is, thank you so much, Lamar.

LJ:

Thank you.

End of interview.