

May 20, 1993

Oral History Project
An Interview with Professor Al Jones
by James C. Onwuachi

James: My name is James Onwuachi and today is Tuesday, May 4, and I am at the office of Professor Al Jones. First of all I'd like to ask...where were you born?

Jones: I was born in Newton, Iowa, which is just 20 miles away from here in 1927. I lived in Tama, Iowa at the time, but my mother had lived in Newton and wanted to go to the Newton hospital...so I've been around this area for a while.

James: So was Newton here before Grinnell or.....?

Jones: Well, they were both old towns...uhh...I grew up in Tama. I was born in Newton, grew up in Tama, came to school at Grinnell. Came back at Grinnell to teach.

James: How large was Tama?

Jones: Mmmmmm...about 2,800 people. Small town on the railroad...tough town...20 tavern...the cite of an Indian reservation or Indian settlement...the Squaki Indian settlement. An interesting odd little town.

James: So you had...what you're saying is you had Indians there?

Jones: Yeah. Indians who bought their lands back from the government 150 years ago and who have settled west of Tama.

James: You made the comment of Tama being a tough town. What did you mean by that?

Jones: Well, it was a tough old railroad town in some ways. Uhhhh...two main line railroads...uhh...Tama always had a reputation for being sort of a tough town compared to Toledo, a town two miles away up in the hills above Tama. It was a very proper, Presbyterian, republican town. And...uhh...Tama was different.

James: Was it considered a tough town because of the Indians?

Jones: Not cause of the Indians, because of the railroads...railroads and the taverns...fights on Saturday night.

James: Ha ha ha (laughter).....So growing up in Tama, what kind of experiences did you have?

Jones: Uh, my father was principal of the high school and we lived up in the hills... uh...we were sort of the town elite compared to the tough railroad section of town. But this was in high school, everything was sort of mixed up. I played on football teams with...uhhh...the Indians that came into town. It was a very interesting democratic place to grow up...in the sense that uhh...they were sort of class conscious attitudes within the town, but a lot of diversity and acceptance of diversity. This is during the depression, too, so nobody was very...uh..successful economically...the time of the Great Depression of the 1930's.

James: How did it affect you?

Jones: Well, it didn't affect our family very much. the economic problems didn't because my father had a good job as a principal. He had been born in Wales...uhh...he had come to this country as a young boy and...uh..he was very conscious, I think still, of a Welsh background...sort of not a radical...but...you know, he, he was a "new dealer."

James: Oh.

Jones: Like Franklin Roosevelt. The household was always filled with sort of politics and I was always kept kind of interested in politics...carried over from the 30's.

James: And was your mother also involved?

Jones: Uhhhh...she was a pretty political woman. Uhh...she had been born in Iowa from a family that moved into Iowa in the 1850's just as Iowa was getting settled as a state and her parents were...uh...old democrats and uh...she remained sort of political and I've remained political throughout my years (mumbles).

James: So when you were in school, did you have any idea of which direction you wanted to go in?

Jones: Ohh..I think I did. Always figured I would be able to go to college. I did very well in high school. When I was in high school, the Second World War was on. So..uh...I enlisted in the Navy just shortly after the war was over. Ummm....I didn't have much in the way of naval experience. I was in what they call boot camp when the war was over. And they immediately transferred us to what they called Ship's Company...sort of permanent staff...if we could type and read. We typed out discharge papers to half the navy. This was at the Great Lakes training station at Illinois. My war stories are rather humorous stories cause I kept getting into little incidents and difficulty like ...not quite understanding what guard duty was and not reporting on time or eating a Waves candy bar when I was supposed to be on guard duty in the middle of the night. All of which got me into slight trouble.

James: Do you have any particular stories?

Jones: Well, the Waves candy bar story is an interesting story. We worked in big drill halls ten times the size of Darby gym (Grinnell College gym).

These became great offices for typewriters and secretaries, young women who came down from near-by towns to work in offices and we had guard duty every night, but there was a coal strike in the nation in the winter of 1945-46. So they couldn't heat these drill halls, so people were making coffee and I made coffee and there was a candy bar sitting there and (made grabbing gesture on the table) I took the candy bar. And the next morning the lieutenant called up and said..., "All those people on guard duty last night report immediately to my office." And uh...we went up, he said, "Now I want to know who ate the Waves candy bar?!" Well, I raised up my hand and said, "I ate it." (laughter) And he made me clean that drill hall for 30 days with a broom after work and it's a huge drill hall full of these tables and typing stands. That's my naval experience.

James: Needless to say, you never touched a candy bar.

Jones: I never stole another candy bar (laughter from both).

James: Now this is the time the war was going on and you were experiencing it. What was your reason for entering the war?

Jones: Well, the one reason I enlisted in the navy, I was only 17, but then I had a cousin who had been drafted earlier that year and ...uh...had been killed on the island of Okinawa only 6 months after he had been drafted. So my parents thought, well, you know..., volunteer for the navy, don't go into the infantry. Then I had other friends, a year or two ahead of me in high school who'd gone in. One was a good friend who was captured by the Germans as a prisoner of war and the another good friend, a couple of years ahead of me, had been killed in the D-Day landing in Normandy. So the war ...came...came back to this small town with a kind of immediacy that there were young people

getting killed all over the world. That seemed to be ...there was no...there was no protest of the war compared to let's say... the Vietnam war. Uhh..., this was , you know..., understood that this was a war against a very terrible enemy, Hitler. So there was a great deal of unity, national unity at the local level.

James: Because of this unity, did you go to war?

Jones: Well, I thought I was going to have to go one way or the other. And I would rather go into the navy, I thought, than the infantry where the training was very short and where my cousin had just gotten killed. And I didn't have good eyes, but the naval doctor in Des Moines was an old friend of the family. One day he said, "Well., I think we need a number of new recruits this week. So relaxing the requirements a little bit, I think I can get you into the navy inspite of your bad eyes." Well, I said, "Fine." I went down the next day. Never saw a ship though.

James: Your entering the war at 17, how did you feel?

Jones: Oh..., a little nervous, but uhmmmm..., the year before , I had gone west to work as a cowboy on a ranch in Montana. This was sort of an exciting thing to do. I had a friend who's father was a cattle buyer and he spent the summer there. He said " Why don't you write them a letter so you can work up on a ranch." And I did and that was a very lonely experience. I was way up in the mountains. The only young person around...except for an assistant cook. Uhh... and I was way up there all summer and very lonely. So when I went into the navy, it wasn't,...and I got quite homesick in Montana, when I went in the navy, it was much easier than going to Montana. I wasn't much of a cowboy in Montana (laughter from James). I had these dreams.....

James: What made you be a cowboy? Was that idea fueled by any movies?

Jones: Romantic views of films. The western movie was a famous classic American movie. And this was quite a while ago, about 50 years ago or so. And Montana was...well, it was still a fairly primitive state compared to other states. Big ranches, wild country, beautiful mountains. I thought it was a nice place to go. I lived in a bunk house. I was more of a chore boy than a cowboy...doing chores. Uhhmmm...ate a lot...steak for breakfast. put on weight. Came back very healthy and very glad to get home. So going to the navy wasn't bad,particularly when I only went as far as Illinois. Didn't get out to see anything.

James: So it's during WW II, and issues concerning the entrance of blacks and Japanese concentration camps surface, how did this affect you?

Jones: Well...I think...uhhh...I was not terribly conscious of uhh... blacks in the army. Living in Tama where there really were no black families...that problem was not recognized. I think Tama was sort of unconsciously racist, which came from their relation not with blacks, but with Indians. There was some attention to the problem of Japanese being relocated. Uhh..., I don't think that the community of Tama was all caught up in that. That was very distant from us on the west coast and I think that problem, problem of the nation as a whole ...uhh I sense that right after Pearl Harbor, there was a great anti-Japanese feeling. In Iowa, where there were no Japanese to speak of, There was little consciousness of what was happening to the Japanese; you read a little bit in the paper, but even then that wasn't enough. There were some Japanese that came to Grinnell College. They got permission to relocate...continue their education in Grinnell

College...uhhh... and there are faculty in Grinnell that remember these Japanese students, but I wasn't very conscious of that phenomena. What I was conscious of was of Nazi Germany. The most dismaying phenomena that I remember from the war were the concentration camps, which were terribly dismaying in the spring of 1945. Now on German feelings, during the first world war, Germans in Iowa and around Tama and Grinnell were really attacked as not being truly American...sort of hyphenated Americans. Uhh..., there was much less of that in the Second World War. There really was not much intolerance of Germans. And most Germans, I think, and there were quite a few in the area around Tama were very loyal American citizens whose children went off to war. But there were no immediate Jews in Iowa...so that sense of what was happening in the concentration camps was never brought home let's say to rural Iowa, though I think the government in Washington knew of them and chose in part to ignore them. There were decisions that we should bomb Ashwitz and the railroad lines leading to Ashwitz, but the assistant secretary of war, who was a man by the name of John McCloy, chose not,...he thought that would be a wasteful use of resources....(he pauses for a moment). That was a very bad decision during the war. (a 4 second pause after that answer)

James: Why was that a bad decision?

Jones: Well, we knew that there was ...I think America knew by this time that there...there was genocide going on in those death camps. And there were some...uhh...army air force people who thought they could slow down that process by bombing all rail lines going into those death camps and bombing some of the death camps themselves. Uhhh...the

war department chose not to on the advise of this John McCloy. A new biography has just come out discussing his decisions. He thought that it would be too difficult...we're along way away and we can't do very much about it. It's a very controversial decision still (3 seconds pause after that). It still a live issue. They...opened up a Holocaust museum in Washington a couple of weeks ago. There are still a few people who feel that America should have done more.

James: What did you do after the war?

Jones: Well, I was still navy ...until ...1946. And in August of '46, I got out of the navy and almost immediately started school on September at Grinnell on the G.I. bill...a very useful program that was ...paid everything for me in school for years.

James: After the Vietnam war, there was a lot of conflict between the public of America and the veterans that came back and I know that Grinnell College has a liberal-activist history. So what kind of experiences happened with the veterans of WW II when they attended college in Grinnell?

Jones: Uhhmm...the ..more recent liberal impulse of the college was some what subdued in those immediate post-war years. The veterans were sort of tired of world news, world events...they wanted to sort of relax...enjoy themselves...uhmm prepare themselves a bit to get out and get a good job. It was...you know , in a post-war period of a... Down until 1950, most uhhh...college students then thought that well, this is sort of a comfortable place to be after the horrors of the war. So there were a lot of parties...a lot of social life. A few of uhh..some of the important issues were raised during the beginning of the cold war and the campus had uhh...lecturers that came in and discussed things, but

not nearly as often as the campus today has people coming in and out on different kinds of issues. The college itself was different then and had it was an all men's campus on the north side; all women's campus on the south side. Uhhmm...it was more formal in terms of social life. (entertainment center on Grinnell College campus). Lots of...uh... formal dances, not Saturday night specials...no Harris center's nonsense (parties are given almost every weekend at Harris center). It was still a good college academically. It was a very nice time to be a college student. You thought the world had solved its problems. It hadn't., of course and by 1950, when I graduated, the Korean War started just two weeks after I graduated. And uhh...the Russians had exploded an atomic device, so we were beginning to enter an arms race...there was some anxiety about that. But I was off to graduate school pretty quickly.

James: At Grinnell, did you feel some of the same problems the other veterans felt?

Jones: Well, to a degree, but I wasn't as much as a veteran as the other people were. They were older...they had been in the navy or marines or army longer. I had just been in the navy for a year or a year and a half. I identified with them, but I was much younger and, but all these veterans were so glad, particularly the one that had..that had a hard war, so glad to get away from that and be here...a nice quiet little college. And they're worrying about their jobs...their future...and they had the G.I. bill of rights, which was really nice. These are people who got college educations who never thought that they'd get a college education. While they enjoyed it...a lot of them were grateful.

James: Was most of the male student population composed of veterans?

Jones: Oh yeah! Almost all the men were veterans. Not all of them. I suppose a third weren't. And that was a declining number by 1950. The class of 1950 was probably the last class with quite a few veterans.

James: Was there ever any conflict between the students and the veterans?

Jones: Not really. There was a little friction between...uhmmm...veterans and townspeople...who had several brawls down at the local American Legion club. And there was a raid on the campus by several townies. Yeah...relations were a little tense at times.

James: What would they do?

Jones: Well, they'd just come up and want to start a fight.

James: Were these big fights?

Jones: Well, they were relatively small. Tough old marines...were sort of looking for a fight, too.

James: Did you take part in any of those brawls? (jokingly)

Jones: I usually...I didn't get into any of those brawls. (smiles with laughter)

James: Coming out of college, did you know what you wanted to do? I know that before the '60's, young people had to be more aware at an early age about what they wanted to do.

Jones: Well, partly so. When I was at Grinnell, as a student, I didn't give a lot of attention to what I was going to do after. I mean I was part of this generation that was sort of glad to be in college and sort of looked forward to the future that...whatever was happening that everything would be all right. A kind of confidence that I think may not have now when they really do begin to worry about graduate schools, getting in graduate schools or getting jobs. I really didn't think much about that until the spring of my senior year when I said, "Wow, what am I going

to do this year!" I said, " Well, maybe I better just go on to graduate school." That's why I went on to graduate school.

James: What graduate school did you attend?

Jones: The University of Michigan, which had a big graduate program in history.

James: Is that what you wanted to major in?

Jones: Well, I sort of gradually drifted into that. Well, then I got married in 1951...and my wife help put me through graduate school. This was the time when I thought, "Well, maybe I should be a journalist," so I wrote to the editor of the Des Moines Register. Then I thought, "oh, well maybe I should go in the state department of the foreign service office. So in '52 or so I took an exam and had an interview to do that. But that was a bad time...in the foreign service as well as the country because it was a time of great anti-communist fears led by Joe McCarthy...you know about McCarthy. The state department was being ...sort of harassed as being a security risk. As a matter of fact, when the new Eisenhower administration came in 1953, a former Grinnell graduate, Scott McCloud, was appointed security officer of the state department. And he had..., he sort of purged the state department of everybody who had...uhmm...disloyal feelings. Uhmm...so the state department didn't look very good. I didn't get a big response from the Des Moines Register who really didn't another editor, so kept going to graduate school.

James: Were you involved in politics very much at this time?

Jones: No. Only as an observer...I was a pretty active democrat...big Adley Stevens supporter...A candidate for president against Eisenhower in the election of '52. Concerned with McCarthy and McAuthur, who was

the American commander in the Korean War, who wanted to widen the war on Asia...maybe bomb China. And..uhh...this was a period of great debate in the country about foreign policy. Uhhh...and I was involved in that as an observer. I remember at the University of Michigan, a lot of these debates posing Washington and the McCarthy hearings and MacAuthur coming back were really all televised. And there were great crowds at the University of Michigan union who used to watch the debates. A very political period.

James: Is this when you became more than a political observer?

Jones: I got a little more politically involved then. Then in 1954, there had been some changes made at the college and a history professor, dean and the president had been fired...the college was sort of in turmoil and they needed another historian at the last minute for the fall of '54. And they called me up to ask me if I would like to teach there next year. I said, "Sure." And I've been here ever since.

James: How did you meet your wife?

Jones: She was a Grinnell student. "Grinnell romance." (said with a smug face)

James: Did you meet her in college?

Jones: No, after we both graduated.

James: What kind of changes did you see in Grinnell that were different when you were a student?

Jones: There weren't many changes cause it had not been too long a period. There weren't, however, any more veterans in school and to a degree, I think, umm...the students of the 1950's did differ from the students of the late 1940's when I was here. They were younger...a little wilder...uhmmm... Didn't have sort of the influence or restraining

hand of disorder in students. I think there were problems in some of the dormitories with too much "prepping." Do you know what prepping is?

James: (I nod to give a no answer)

Jones: Well, it is sort of an initiation to the dormitories. All the men lived in dormitories for four years and you got initiated into the dormitory going through sort of a ritual, which consisted mostly of getting paddled on your butt by the prepmaster. And for a while in the 50's, the college was in bad shape. The president had been fired, the endowment was very low and until they got a new president in 1955, a president by the name of Howard Bowan, the moral wasn't very good. The previous president had been very autocratic and the college was very poor, relatively. People had been sort of threatened by this former president. If you made a little trouble and you didn't have tenure, you might lose your job. Well, in '54, after this guy had been fired, the faculty sort of moved in to take much more of a major role in what you call the governance of the institution. And it was very fortunate to get a really first class president in 1955. It was really important for the history of the college. I mean Howard Bowan,...he had a lot of support in the trustees...he got some really big grants from the Ford foundation. He hired a lot of new and able faculty and by 1957 or 58 there was very high moral amongst the faculty, who felt they were living through a kind of..uhhh... golden age through the history of the college. Things were really looking up. Salaries were improved, teaching loads were reduced... those two things faculty were happy about. Students were getting better....uhh...the college was getting wealthier...getting grants. Nothing like the big endowment we have now. That sort of came in the

1970's and the 80's. The college really did prosper until the 1960's...well, it did sort of prosper, but Bowan left to become president of the University of Iowa. And the college itself was going through a lot of these sort of problems of students in the 1960's anti-war problems, the beginning of the drug problem, sex, intergrated dormitory problems.

James: When did that happen?

Jones: Late 1960's, which was sort of a wild time.