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Interview with John B. Hunter II

Title: Marine Memories

Date: June 07, 1994; Interview #: KK-CT-001-121

John B. Hunter: My name is John B. Hunter II. I was born in Wheeling, Ohio County, West Virginia in 1925. I was the last of seven children of E.M. Hunter, Sr. and Lola Philson Hunter. And had wonderful parents. Both of them were college educated and had been school teachers. I remember my mother telling me, "I sure never planned on having seven children." But she handled it well and we all survived.

Steven W. Franklin: What was your neighborhood like; who were your friends?

JBH: I was born in the house that my parents lived in on Fulton Heights in Wheeling, February 11, 1925.

SWF: Tell us about where you grew up in Wheeling, what the neighborhood was like, who your friends were, what kind of families they came from.

JBH: **The neighborhood was very diversified on Fulton Heights.** The man next door worked in a bank. Next to him was a man who owned a roofing company. I think we had our fair share of policemen and firemen. Several of the men, the fathers on the hill, worked for Wheeling Steel Corporation at the time. One was the grade school principal at the grade school that I went to, Fulton Grade School. I entered Fulton Grade School in the first grade, and still have many, many friends. We had great teachers. I remember most of them very fondly. From there I went to Triadelphia High School for two years, and then went to Wheeling High School. [[Return to Top](#)] (02.5) I had kind of an interesting life. **I remember more than anything the floods.** We had many of them. It seemed like we had one or two every year. And they were not the gully-washers that you hear about today on Wheeling Creek. They were back-up water from the Ohio River. And the one I remember more than ever was the 1936 Flood. My father took me to McFadden's Store and bought me a pair of rubber boots so I wouldn't get my feet wet, because we were all going down where the flood was. Of course, we were- where I lived we were up on top of the hill and could see the widespread properties, and homes, and businesses that were flooded. (03.3) But

I was kind of an industrious young fellow and I managed to get myself a Liberty Magazine route. And I went around selling my Liberty Magazines. It was a weekly magazine, and I suppose I had twenty or twenty-five customers. And the magazine sold for five cents apiece. And I forget what my commission was, but it might have been as much as twenty percent. And back in those days anybody that had twenty-five or thirty cents a week was pretty, pretty, pretty well off. But after my father bought me my boots during that flood, because of my affiliation with selling Liberty Magazines, a man came to my house from Pittsburgh, with the Pittsburgh Post Gazette, and wanted me to sell the newspapers. And I- He left me with a whole bunch of newspapers. And I thought, "Where on earth am I going to sell these?" But I put them in my paper bag and went down to where the flood was, and I can't remember who it was, but they loaned me their rowboat. (04.4) And I got in my rowboat and I rowed out to National Road yelling, "Extra! Extra! Read all about the flood!" And I sold many a newspaper to people up on their porch roofs because they had to live on the second floors. And I rowed clear out to what's known as Theta Place, and that's behind Elby's on the other side of the Creek. And there were seven or eight houses up in there. And I remember one man, I pulled up to the roof of his house and he gave me fifty cents for a newspaper. And I thought that was the greatest thing. And I sold all my newspapers, and I rowed back down to Fulton, and I ran up home, and my mother called that man in Pittsburgh and he brought me down more newspapers. And then the flood went down and my business collapsed. But it was- I remember that very, very vividly. [[Return to Top](#)] (05.3) And then I got myself a job as a bill-poster. I worked with a man who did bill-posting for the theatres in town, and would do them for the carnivals and circuses that would come to town. And I started out by handing him paper. I would hand him the paper and he would paste it onto the side of the buildings or on the billboards, or sometimes they were bus stops, or wherever we were allowed to post the bills. And he started by paying me fifty cents a day. And as I grew older and got my driver's license, he would turn the business over to me to do the bill-posting. And one summer we had the theatres, and then a carnival came to town, and a circus came to town. And I was working from daylight till dark. And my pay was forty cents an hour. And I remember the last work week I worked for him I had worked so many- enough hours to earn forty-seven dollars. And when the man said to his wife, "Write John a check for forty-seven dollars-" And I remember her response was, "No wonder we don't have any money! You're paying that stupid kid that much money?! That's ridiculous!" It offended me so bad, and on Monday morning I went down and enlisted in the Marine Corps. (06.7) Nobody thought- I had to get my parent's consent, because I was just- just seventeen years old. And nobody thought I could- would be accepted because I was so skinny. And I got- was examined in Pittsburgh. And I remember the medical man said, "Doctor, this kid only weighs (one hundred and-) seventeen pounds." And I remember him looking up at me and said, "How old are you?" And I said, "Seventeen." And he said, "Take him. We'll fatten him up." And they did. I- Well by the time I finished my boot-training at Paris Island, South Carolina, I weighed a hundred thirty-five pounds. (07.4)

SWF: How long after you finished your training did you become involved in the- (Second World War).

JBH: As soon as I finished my basic training in Paris Island, we were shipped by train to what was known as the Marine base at New River, North Carolina. That's now Camp Le June. But Camp Le June did not become "Camp Le June" until six or seven months after I arrived. And they named Camp Le June after General Le June. And General Le June had died in December or

January of nineteen- 1942. And that's when they renamed the Marine base at New River, North Carolina.(08.3)

SWF: During your training or shipment, did you run into anyone else from Wheeling?

JBH: Yes, I did. That's very interesting. Of course, I had left from Wheeling and went down to the Pennsylvania Railroad, which is as I- the station was just about where the Veteran's Memorial- the Veteran's Amphitheatre are. And that was the passenger station for the Pennsylvania Railroad. And a number of us- several of those fellows I knew. And I remember some of them. And as we went up the river, why we picked up more recruits or people who wanted to enlist. I remember several from Steubenville, Ohio. And arrived in Pittsburgh. And we were taken to the recruiting station. I think it was in the Fulton Building. And we were all examined. And the ones that were accepted were sworn into the Marine Corps right there and taken over to the train station, which I think is where the Station Square is, and were shipped off to South Carolina. (09.4) And I remember going down there and how hot it was. We had all the windows open. Of course, there was no air-conditioning in those days. And the train went all night long. And, of course, we didn't have Pullmans, we were just in the coach-cars. So you got what sleep you could. And I remember arriving in Savanna, Georgia, and stepped off of that train and the heat hit me, and I just could not- I didn't think I would be able- be able to get my breath it was so hot. But from there we were taken to Paris Island and put into training, and that was a completely new kind of life for me. I- far more than I expected. But it was good training.(10.0) I remember my platoon and the boys that were in it. Some from Wheeling. And after we completed our basic training we were shipped out, and not too many from my platoon ended up with me. But I remembered being assigned to "L" Company of the 23rd Regiment. And a young fellow came running up to me and said, "I saw your name. I knew you were coming in." And that was Beecher Rhodes. And I looked at Beecher and I said, "Beecher, how long have you been here?" "Oh!", he says, "I've been here three months." So he was really an old salt.(10.8) But I knew Beecher was behind me in one or two years in high school. And I knew he couldn't be seventeen years old. But I never told on him, until 1983. We got reacquainted and we were having a company party in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. And Beecher and his wife came into the diningroom, and I said, "Beecher, can I tell now?" And he said, "What?" And I said, "Can I tell now, Beecher?" He said, "What, that I wasn't old enough to be in the Marine Corps?" And I said, "Yes." He said, "I think most of them know it now, but you can tell it." And I just learned from this last reunion that we had that Beecher was sixteen years old in March of 1942.(11.4) But we all trained together and learned together, and shipped out from North Carolina in 1943 to Camp Pendleton in Ocean Side, California. And a lot more training. And then we were taken down to the ships in San Diego in January, right after New Year's Day in 1944, and went aboard the troop transports. And I remember taking off at night. It was in the middle of the night. And when we all got up the next morning we were out to sea. And I remember as we went along, I never saw so many ships in my life. And we went to the Hawaiian Islands where I saw them loading anti-aircraft guns and other arms onto other ships. And then we took off from there. Of course we didn't- we had no idea where we were going when we took off, but after we left the Hawaiian Islands we were told we were going to the Marshall Islands, and we would go into combat.(12.7) Of course, I'd never heard of the Marshall Islands and I didn't know what to expect. I remember we had one marine on board and he- of course- but his girlfriend worked in Washington, D.C. And I remember him telling us, in fact I think he told us right after we left Hawaii, that we were

going to the Marshall Islands, and we didn't believe him. But he said that they had a code and he knew where we were going, and that we would be landing on the islands of Roi and Namura. It turned out that he was right. That's exactly where we went to. And I think I still thought we were still on maneuvers, until we went ashore. We were in the third wave going ashore at the island of Roi. And I could hear the firing and the- . It was somewhat like being on a rifle range, until I had to step over three dead marines. And then I realized that this is- this is pretty serious. (13.9) I ran to the first position that we were supposed to run to, and as I got there I saw a Japanese enlisted man and a Japanese officer setting up a .50 calibre machine-gun. And I remember raising my rifle, and I wasn't the only one that saw him when I fired. I think- it seemed like five thousand other marines fired at the same time. But I remember the Japanese officer had his sword out of its scabbard, and was holding it up, and this enlisted man was setting up this .50 calibre machine-gun. But that was the closest combat that I saw. Because had they gotten that .50 calibre machine-gun set up, we would've- could have all been curtains. But that ended that. But the battle did last until the end of the next day when the marines secured the island. (14.8) The island, Namura, which was joined to Roi by the island of Roi, that's R-O-I, the combat was more fierce. There was a lot of foliage, a lot of trees, and brush. And that's where the residential areas, or the living quarters, of those two islands was. And the combat went on until about noon the next day, when the 24th Marine Regiment secured that island. And, of course, there were still some Japanese around that would act as snipers, and they had to be cleared out. But- that was- (15.3) And we were there for several days. I remember being there on my nineteenth birthday. And I remember my sergeant said, "Hunter, I'm putting you on the burial detail." That was to bury the Japanese, because there seemed to be hundreds, or thousands, of dead Japanese. And I said, "Oh, Pete, please don't make me do that. This is my birthday." He says, "Okay," and called somebody else. And I thank him to this day. And Pete's still living. He lives- lived in Yonkers, New York. I understand he's up in Meridian, Connecticut now. His daughter's home. He's recovering from a stroke, but coming along good. (16.3) But I have good memories of all the men that I was associated with in both grade school and high school, and my career in the Marine Corps. I'd been injured in fighting the brush fires in California (prior to WWII), and was reinjured on the island of Roi as we were reloading the ships with our ammunition and supplies. And had to go through an operation. I was only back on the island of Maui in the Hawaiian Islands maybe two months when I was called to the sick bay by the battalion doctor. And he told me he'd scheduled me for an operation at Aiea Heights Naval Hospital in Honolulu. And I told him I didn't want to go, and I didn't want to take the chance of leaving my company and my friends. And he said, "You've got to go. But you'll be back in thirty days." Probably fortunately for me, the surgeon messed up and I never got to see those fellows again until- for thirty-nine years- in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, one of the Fourth Marine Division's Associations reunion, which was the first one I had attended. So, that's how we all became reacquainted again. (17.5)

SWF: When during your time overseas did you think about home, Wheeling?

JBH: Well, I thought real strongly of home many times. (chuckling) I think when we went over the side of the ship in the middle of the night into our landing craft, and the boats started around and around and around, and everybody got sea-sick but me, and I had to sit there and hold my ears to keep from getting sick from hearing them to be sick. Then that first night in combat on the island of Roi, I was so sorry I'd ever left my mother's apron-strings. I- it was just- well, it was just horrifying. It was just- you were just scared to death! (18.2) Flares would go up and- They'd

be fired from either by the enemy or by your own people to see if you could see what was moving out there or coming towards you. And that was the most terrifying thing is when that first flare went off and I felt like I was the only one on the island and that I'd get blown away. Of course, we were in our fox holes. We'd dug our fox holes, but it was all sand. And, of course, the sand would fall in and you'd keep getting higher and higher in your fox hole, and- . It was very, very terrifying. (18.8) The second night wasn't as bad because we had pretty well annihilated most of the enemy. But every now and then your corporal of the guard would come crawling up on his belly and saying, "Keep your eye out. Some Japs are still crawlin' around slittin' the throats of the guys. So, be careful." Well, it was pretty tough to sleep after that, being wakened up from that so, so- . But we all survived that. And we ("L" Company) had one man wounded, but we lost no- deaths, although there were I think three hundred and ninety killed in that combat, seven hundred and some wounded, and four people received the Medal of Honor for their heroic deeds in that combat action. I was surprised when I learned that four people had received the Medal of Honor, because on the island of Roi it was relatively quiet compared to the island of Namura. (19.8) And that's- one received a medal of- One enlisted man who was on the island of Roi received the Medal of Honor; and three, two officers and one enlisted man on the isl- that was in the 24th Marines in the combat on the island of Namura, received them; three posthumously, and one is still living. (20.0)

SWF: When you reflected on home, what images came to mind?

JBH: Well, I wish I had my Liberty Magazine route. And I missed my mother, and my father, and my girlfriend, tremendously. And I certainly wanted to get back home, but I knew that there was a terrible job ahead of us, and I'd just learned how bad it was. I had only gotten home once after I enlisted. I think that was a three or four day pass. We didn't- They didn't let you go very long. But my mother and my father, and my brothers and sisters, they would write often and would send things. Would send cookies and other things that I could use. And we would all share our- my mother's cookies. (21.1) And I had two brothers, an older- both older; one had come back from his job in San Francisco and enlisted right after the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor. Then I enlisted. And then my older brother, I think, was drafted in 1943. And we had an older sister who was a head nurse at a children's hospital in Chicago, who felt she should enlist, too, because her three brothers were in the military. So, she enlisted into the Army Nurses Corps. And served there, served on the island of Tiniad. (21.8) And she was about the best sister any little brother ever had. She would write me constantly. Every now and then I'd open the envelope and there would be a ten dollar money order would drop out, and I really appreciated that because we had the great sum of fifty dollars a month (perdium), and that as alot of money (for her to send). Of course, the government furnished the uniforms, the clothes, the food, and everything else, so our fifty dollars could be spent for personal articles and pleasure. (22.3)

SWF: Do you remember where you were when you discovered that the Japanese had bombed Pearl Harbor?

JBH: I sure do. I was at home. And it was a Sunday morning. And I remember my mother was so upset and terrified. She- I remember her running and saying, "John! John! The Japanese have bombed Pearl Harbor!" That really didn't mean anything to me because I didn't know where Pearl Harbor was. I was only sixteen years old at the time. And, but it wasn't- She got out the

map and she showed me and she said, "It's the Hawaiian Islands; and next they'll be coming into San Francisco, or the California Coast. And we will be at war!" And of course she had three sons, and she knew what was in store for them. (22.9) I remember the- everybody was anxious and interested, and glued to their radioes so they could hear the news. And anytime an extra paper would come out, and there were lots of them that'd come out, "Extra! Extra! Read all about it!", you were out to buy a newspaper, if you had the price of one. And then the draft had started a year or two before. They were going to draft the young men for one year's military training. Then, it was only to be for one year. And I'm not sure that any of them ever got out after being called for that one year. I believe the war broke out, and then, of course, the draft speeded up tremendously. (23.6) I remember one of my friends in high school in his senior year- and he dropped out and joined the Marine Corps. And that was probably my first real interest in the Marine Corps. I knew that we had the United States Marines, but I didn't know much about them. And I followed in August, and several of my classmates followed after that. And some of them are still my real good friends yet today. And one of them was Bill Gilligan. He was state senator from Tyler County and that district of West Virginia. And he knew I was at Camp Le June. We used to correspond. And I remember he came to visit me. He had been, after his basic training was at Camp Legune, but (was now) at Hadnot Point, which was some distance from where I was. (24.6) And I remember he came down to see me, and he had Carlisle Farnsworth with him, who just retired from the president of the United National Bank here at- couple years ago. And that's when I met Carlisle. And then over on the island of Roi and Namura I'd heard that the 15th Defense Battalion was coming in to relieve us, to defend the island when we left. And I knew that that was where Bill Gilligan and Carlisle Farnsworth were, so I asked my sergeant, Pete Pappas, if I could go over and visit them. I'd introduced Pete to them when they came down to visit me one time. And he said, "Yeah, but be careful." He said, "They're still shootin' over there." They were up on the tip of Namura Island, I think. (25.1) And I went up and I found them, and we exchanged greetings. I remember I had dumped the water out of my canteen and filled it with saki that we had- was one of our rewards. And I gave Bill Gilligan a drink of saki and- (laughing) he just spit it out, and spit it out. And I remember to this day he still accuses me of giving him trick gasoline! (More laughing) And he won't let me forget that. But anyway, that- that was that experience. (25.6)

SWF: When you came back to Wheeling from overseas, what changes did you notice immediately?

JBH: One of the changes I noticed, during the Thirties growing up it was, you got- you have to remember the Great Depression was on and it was- it was a terrible time. Nobody had any money, and unemployment was tremendous. And it wasn't uncommon for people to come to your door begging for food, or any old clothes. (26.0) I remember the umbrella-man and the scissors-sharpeners would carry all their wares on their back, and offer to repair your umbrella or sharpen your scissors or knives for ten cents or fifteen cents, or anything that you could afford to give. Other people would come to the door selling apples for a nickle apiece. I remember my mother never turned anybody down for a meal. She- We always had a garden, and she was quite a lady. She did all her own canning. And we had a farm out on the Pennsylvania- West Virginia border at Beeham, Pennsylvania. So, we always had plenty of food, especially milk and dairy products, and meats. The thing I noticed more than anything when I came back, I didn't see the women out digging dandelions in the Spring so that they could feed their families. I saw no more

umbrella-men, knife-sharpeners, because they were all employed. And there was prosperity. And I remember saying to myself, "Isn't this wonderful!" Because there were homeless people back then. And there were- people were destitute. (27.2) I remember going to school, and some of the little kids would come to school in tattered clothes. Some didn't- they didn't have enough money to buy soap. And the kids weren't always (as) clean as they should be. And I thought I'd never have to see that again. [[Return to Top](#)] And when I go out the front door of this place and see the soup line- the line- the line for the soup kitchen, and I see and read about the homeless people, I wonder what on Earth has gone wrong in the last fifty years. We have Welfare, we have Social Security, we have all these things, yet the disadvantaged, if that's what you want to call them, I cannot believe the numbers. And when I hear of the numbers of homeless people in cities all over this country, it makes my heart hang heavy. (28.1)

SWF: You mentioned when you were much younger and you used to go around delivering the "Liberty-

JBH: -Magazine"-

SWF: -right. Also, you mentioned you were involved with posting bills?

JBH: Posting bills, yes.

SWF: Do you remember posting bills for any of the local merchants or businesses?

JBH: It was just the theatres. And the man that I worked for had the contract to post the bills for all the theatres: the Capital, the Court, the Rex, the Liberty, the Victoria, and the State theatres. (28.7) There was a theatre in South Wheeling at 23rd street. And I think we did a little bit for them, but he had so much local business there in South Wheeling that he didn't- he didn't advertise much, as I recall. I've forgotten his name, but I think I was in high school with a couple of his children. I can't remember his name. But the theatre owners were very, very successful back there, because that- that was one of the main sources of entertainment, was the local theatre. And the cost was somewhat small: ten cents for the State or the Vic', Victoria; the Rex. The Capital was a little more because their movies evidently were a little higher class, I guess; and the Court. But I remember that, and I would walk over Wheeling Hill down to the theatre; then I would walk all the way back home to Fulton Heights. And I had a friend, Dick Criswell, and he and I would walk together. And we did that many, many, many times as very, very young people. (29.9)

SWF: Do you remember which films you saw at which theatres? Any that stand out?

JBH: Yes, I remember: it was a "Gary Cooper" in The Plainsman. I remember that one. And I remember I was in high school then, but Gone With The Wind. And, Oh! That was- that was really THE movie. It was the longest movie that there ever was at that time. And Clark Gable. And I can't really remember them all, but I remember Clark Gable. And I think he said, "damn." And that was really something, to say "damn" in a movie. I don't- they don't know how that ever got by the censors. But that's about the worst you ever heard, then. In fact, that was the only time

I ever heard the four-letter word used in a movie, until after World War II. Long after World War II. (30.3)

SWF: How did the interior of the theatres compare with one another?

JBH: As I recall, they were all beautiful. Of course, the most beautiful, and still is, is the Capital. And I remember I would go with this man that I worked for, and we would go into the basement of the Capital Theatre. And he would get the papers, and we would go out to Ohio Valley Advertising, and he would get at the barrel, the paste, from Ohio Valley Advertising. And then he and I would go on our way to post the bills. And, of course, as I reached the ripe old age of fifteen or sixteen, and had my operator's license, I became the driver and the bill-poster. And he worked full-time for Ohio Valley Advertising. He was a- he did the great big boards. But I remember we did the big billboards on the Capital Theatre. They're no longer there. And one time I had to do those by myself, and that was pretty, pretty tough, because you had to work with a twenty-foot long brush with a twenty-foot handle. And, so, it was interesting. (31.3)

SWF: Did they have any other type of entertainment at the movie theatres besides films?

JBH: Yes, I remember doing the advertising, also- You got to remember, I got passes for all these theatres, so I- I think you had to pay a dime or a nickel with the pass because you had to pay the tax. But that's one reason I got to go and got to take my buddies with me, because I had passes. That was a little bonus I got for working for this. And that's what you would pay the people whose property you would post the bills on. You would give them passes to go to the theatre. I remember seeing "Blackstone, the Magician". And others- I can't think of them all right now but there were others, and they were on the stage of the Capital Theatre. But I do remember "Blackstone". The most amazing magician. And I've never seen his equal to this day, in my mind, because it impressed me so.

SWF: Do you remember what year that was?

JBH: No, I can't remember that. It had to be the late Thirties, or very, very early Forties. But- I just- You got to remember, I was gone by August of 1942, so- [[Return to Top](#)]

SWF: Anything like vaudeville?

JBH: No. No. My mother would have never have let me go to that, anyway. But I don't remember vaudeville. No. Not, not in Wheeling. I'm sure it must have been here, but I don't remember it. (32.4)

SWF: In the length of time after your return from the war, what are the most important changes you've seen in Wheeling?

JBH: Well, one of the sad things is the loss of the business and industry. I remember, I think, when I came back from the war, or shortly after the war, our population was sixty-five or seventy thousand people. Of course, when you drove downtown in the mornings, you'd have to turn on your headlights at ten or eleven o'clock in the morning because of the smoke. We don't have the

smoke. You don't have to turn on your headlights at ten or eleven o'clock in the morning, but we also don't have the business or industry. I remember Bill Mueggi, our former mayor, Bill Mueggi, saying, "John, we sure have been pall-bearer to an awful lot of industry that started and left Wheeling." And that is true. (33.2) And I don't- don't really know why that- completely know why. I think one reason was our highway system, because all we had through here was U.S. Route 40 for- till Interstate 70 was put in. It took them fifteen years to build that fifteen miles from the Ohio border to the Pennsylvania border. And I think one of those reasons was we- our governors could only serve for four years. And could only serve and- Consequently they would get the highways built in their own particular areas, of which they were raised in or had an interest in, and the rest of us suffered. And I don't think there's any doubt that that had a lot to do with us. (33.9) But not only that, it took West Virginia so long to get its interstate systems completed within the state of West Virginia. And I remember reading in the New York papers that one of the hottest spots in the country was probably Wheeling, West Virginia. It had the railroads, it had the rivers, it was one hour from Pittsburgh, two hours from Columbus, and had the potential of being one of the busiest cities in the East. And, of course, that's not happened. And I don't know why it hasn't happened. It has not happened. [[Return to Top](#)] (34.6) I'm so happy to see when business and industry does come into the state, and into this area. And I remember I know many people that have been here over the years have come with insurance companies, and other businesses, and how they loved Wheeling, West Virginia; and the school systems, and the churches, and the cultural areas, and the parks. I know of one couple who, after retiring in one of the largest states, came back here to Wheeling and built their home. And retired here, and are still here. And he used to say, "When they close offices in Wheeling and move them somewhere else, they don't know what they're doing." But those decisions are not made in Wheeling. They're made in New York, and Hartford, Connecticut, and other places. But that's pretty much it. (35.6)

SWF: Can you understand why many young people, young adults, are leaving Wheeling, leaving West Virginia?

JBH: Well, yes, yes I do. I had four children. My wife and I had four children, and good children. They all graduated from high school. They all went to college. I have a son that's a- is a lawyer, a practicing lawyer in Buckhannon, West Virginia. He's the only one (of their children) in West Virginia. I have a daughter, oldest daughter, who is a registered dietician, graduate of V.P.I., Blacksburg, Virginia. And she was with the University of North Carolina Hospital for several years. And then- then her husband was a professor at the University of North Carolina. She went on to Duke University Hospital. (36.4) But a couple of years ago, her husband resigned from the University of North Carolina and took a position with the American Heart Association in Dallas, Texas. So, they're now in Texas. I have another daughter that's a practicing psychologist, and has her doctorate from the University of Northern Colorado. And has her private practice in New York City. The youngest daughter was a graduate of Marshall University. And she's manager of a department store in- right outside of Boston, Massachusetts, and lives in Amesbury, Massachusetts. (36.9) My son and his wife have four children. My oldest daughter has one child. My third daughter, the doctor of psychology, has never married. And my youngest daughter, she and her husband have no children. But one reason they aren't here is, that there was no work for them. My son could have come back from the Air Force and started practicing law, but he was offered a position with a law firm in Buckhannon, West Virginia. And

although he kind of "pooh-poohed" it, his wife said, "Burt, when we were going to West Virginia Wesleyan, I thought, 'What a beautiful little town to raise a family.' So why don't you go down and see what those people have to offer." And that's how they got back to Buckhannon, West Virginia. (37.9)

SWF: How'd you guys (Hunter and Beecher Rhodes) end up going out (in search of a tattoo parlor during WWII)?

JBH: Okay- when I arrived there at "L" Company, 23rd Regiment, and met my old classmate, Beecher Rhodes, Beecher said, "John, have you been on liberty yet?" And I said, "No, Beecher, I haven't been on liberty for a couple months." I said, "You know, they didn't let you out down there." He said, "Well, I'm going to take you on liberty tonight." And I said, "Okay, if I'm allowed." He said, "Oh, you're allowed." He said, "We have to be in by midnight, but you're allowed." So off to Jacksonville, North Carolina we went that evening. And what a little town. Just jammed full of marines and Navy people. And just kind of wall-to-wall military. And I think Beecher probably introduced me to a glass of beer or two, and then suggested we get a tattoo. And I said, "Oh, Beecher! My mother would kill me!" "Ah", he said, "we- yeah-" He said, "We got to have a tattoo." He said, "You take those old sergeants we have back there." He said, "They got tattoos all over 'em. And if we want 'em to think anything of us, we got to get a tattoo." (39.0) Well, I don't know- we ended up at the tattoo parlor, which happened to be right next to a place that sold beer by the "lily-cup" full, little- like your picnic cups. And I never figured out whether I won or lost, but I was first to get the tattoo. And I remember the tattooist taking my arm and strapping it to an arm-chair, and got out his paraphernalia, and got the design. I picked the tattoo of a "devildog"; that's a big bulldog with a World War I helmet (American "doughboy" helmet) on top of it, on its head. (39.7) When he started with that electric needle (laughing), I tried to get my arm out of there. I said, "I can't stand this!" And he convinced me I could. And I kept screaming I couldn't stand that. I mean that hurt! That was an electric needle, and he dipped that needle down into different inks: reds, the blues. He'd go to work on my arm, and I just- it just almost- OH! I couldn't stand it! So to help me out, my friend, Beecher, would run next door and get me a lily-cup full of beer and come back. And I'd drink the beer, and Beecher'd run for another cup of beer. The tattooist kept going, kept going. And I had tears running down my eyes. I mean I was crying, and- It was horrible! (40.4) And finally he finished, and he took a piece of cotton and a bottle of alcohol, and put the alcohol in the- on the cotton, and he rubbed that over me, and he- . That's when I realized I'd really been wounded, because that- . And he wiped the blood off of it. And he took a paper towel and he took some masking tape, and he threw the paper towel in. He wrapped the masking tape around it. He said, "Okay." And I got up, and I said, "Okay, Beecher, it's your turn." And he says, "Oh, hell, no! If it hurts that much I'm not havin' it done!" And to this day Beecher doesn't have a tattoo (laughing). (41.0)

SWF: An interview wouldn't be quite complete unless we mentioned the name of Bill Lias.

JBH: Well, Bill Lias, I remember him- hearing about-[TAPE SIDE #A ENDS-TAPE SIDE #B BEGINS]

JBH: I heard the name of Bill Lias as a very young person. Growing up I heard my father talk to various men and they would discuss Bill Lias and his operations. But I remember the police

chief getting shot through the arm one time, and they thought that was- might be related to the activities of Bill Lias. Not Bill Lias, himself, but his boot-legging days. (00.6) But, I really- I saw Mr. Lias. And I remember he ran the- he owned the race track. And it was a very beautiful race track. And I think in my bill-posting days, I think maybe we posted a few bills for the Wheeling Downs Race Track. I'm not sure. That Wheeling Downs may have come after- after my bill-posting days. Then I remember his Zeller's Steak House. I was in there a few times. And when you're- when I got into the insurance business and the company men, state agents, would come to town, my father would take them to Zeller's Steak House, and they thought that was one of the greatest things in the world. (01.2) I- I really don't have much recollection. You remember, you got to remember after I got home from the service, I got married within two months after coming home in 1945. And then we were busy raising a family, so I- . (01.6) I remember his trial. I remember it very well. I remember he pleaded guilty to the charge of tax evasion, which was the charge. And Judge Baker, the federal judge, sentenced him to a period of time in the federal penitentiary. And I remember him appealing that sentence, and (he) said that Judge Baker had been a customer of his restaurant, and he thought he was on friendly terms with him, and he never dreamed that he (Baker) would sentence him to serve the term in the penitentiary. And (Lias) asked for a new trial. (02.4) And apparently the trial was set aside, and he was granted a new trial, because he felt that he was- not that the judge wouldn't have found him- not that he would not have been found guilty. He wasn't protesting that. He was protesting that he pleaded guilty so- because he did not think he would be sentenced to a penitentiary at his age, and at his weight. I remember he was a very, very large man. And I've talked to many people, and I- . You know Mrs. Lias just died here recently, his widow. And I did go to the auction that they had at the Pine Room at Oglebay, and looked over the thing- the merchandise- very beautiful merchandise, most of it old, some of it very worn. But they evidently lived somewhat of a lavished life compared to what I live. But some said he did much good, especially with their church and among their friends, and- . I- That's about all I know. I really don't know enough to- . (03.5)

SWF: Do you have any recollections of Wheeling's reaction, the neighborhood's reaction to his trial and subsequent sentence?

JBH: Oh, I think it was that they'd never find him guilty. But I remember reading many things in the paper. And I knew one of his men that was a lawyer and had graduated from law school. I don't know if he ever practiced, but he worked for Bill Lias all his life. And he was a nice person. I remember one summer I drove a dry cleaning truck, and I used to pick the dry cleaning up at his mother's house. He lived at home with his mother. And that's when you could get two suits cleaned for a dollar. And I remember he always gave me a quarter tip. And he always had the nicest suits. But I really know of no bad about him. I do know Bill Lias' nephew, and I've always thought the world of him. He's a very successful attorney. And I- (04.7) I just- I remember one thing. That you could walk the streets. You got to remember, in me telling you, that when I was a little kid, and in high school, we could walk anywhere you wanted to. Anywhere. You could walk from downtown Wheeling to Edgington Lane, or Elm Grove. And little girls could do that to. And you didn't have the muggings, you didn't have the things that go on today. You know, it's- it's - . Today, I won't drive south of the creek after dark, let alone going anyplace south of the creek. I don't even like to walk the streets of Wheeling, and I don't very often, without having somebody with me. And we didn't have that back in those days. I'm not saying it didn't happen,

but the word was that Mr. Lias' people would take care of that. And if that was vigilante operations, it was okay with me because it was a very, very safe place. [[Return to Top](#)] (05.7) We didn't have- . I think I could count the murders that we had in Ohio County on one hand in ten or fifteen years when I was a child. You know what it is today, although it's still one of the safest cities in the country. I hate to think about the other cities who don't have the "Safest-City" status. But I think our police force does a fantastic job, under the circumstances. I have a scanner. And I've listened to the police calls. And my heart hangs heavy for the policeman. Whatever they get payed, it's not enough. (06.5)

SWF: What do you see in Wheeling's future, realistically?

JBH: I feel very good about Wheeling, now. I see the new things. I see the younger people in Council. I think they have great ideas. I think that Wheeling will come back. It will be one of the strongest and best cities, and counties, in West Virginia. I'm not sure it will happen in my lifetime, but I do think it will come. (07.1) I think that one of the worst things that ever happened- ever, ever happened to this city was voting out Urban Renewal. Do you realize the businesses that left Wheeling?: we lost Sears and Roebuck, we lost J.C. Penny, we lost Montgomery Ward, who only had a catalog store, but at least they were here. We lost so many revenue-producing businesses that I wonder how we survive today with the few businesses that are left. But the results are that the taxation has had to increase on the ones remaining to carry the load. And I- I just- . But that was just a terrible, terrible thing to happen. (08.0) But I also remember early in high school we had an opportunity to get a flood wall. We had the chance to get a flood wall along the Ohio River and the creeks to prevent flooding in Wheeling. And I remember a very fine councilman, and a nice man, every bit as old as my father, who said, "There's no way I can go for that, because I don't want my children and grandchildren to have to pay for that damn flood wall." Well, so the flood wall went in Huntington, and it went in Parkersburg, and it went in many, many other areas. And it went in all over the country. And we still have the taxation. And our children, and our grandchildren, and great grandchildren will continue to pay for it. But those cities sit high and dry while we got flooding. Now, the flood conditions have improved so much that it's just- in fact, the last flood- Ohio River flood I remember was in June of one year, because I was on the Ohio- Red Cross Disaster Committee. That June flood was a "500-year flood". You just didn't get floods in June; you got them in January, and February, and March's, and maybe April, but you didn't get them in the middle of the summer. But with the "Watershed Programs" that have gone in, that's improved tremendously. (09.3) **But that was probably the worst blow to Wheeling**, was voting out Urban Renewal. It's the only city in the United States that voted out Urban Renewal. I wish you could go to Minneapolis, Minnesota, and St. Paul and see what's gone in their Urban Renewal areas. Go to Baltimore, in their harbor areas, and see what Urban Renewal did for them. It's really a sad, sad situation. And many of my friends, and very, very good friends, were violently against Urban Renewal. The principle thing about Urban Renewal that- Loyd Stenger's feed store, up here in an alley behind our (present location, 1117 Chapline Street)- their hardware and feed store was taken by Urban Renewal, and it made him very mad. And he was a very influential person. (10.2) And he was able to enlist two of the greatest merchandisers this city has ever seen, and that was Bob Levenson and George Boury. Two of the greatest merchandisers I have ever known in my life. And they always knew that if you could get the traffic, you could get the business. They've always- they've always had a knack of getting their share of the

business. But they loaned their services, their talent, and some of their people to campaigning and working against Urban Renewal, and got it voted out. I'm sure both were very, very sorry years later. I've never talked to George about it. I remember I said something to Bob Levenson once and he shook his head and said- I just forget what he said, but it was a terrible thing to do. The city died from there on for many, many years. [[Return to Top](#)] (11.1)

SWF: What small businesses also went out besides Sears and Pennys.

JBH: Oh, lord, too numerous to remember.

SWF: Any favorites that were lost?

JBH: I really haven't had time to think about that and can't think of it off hand. But there were many, because the malls. And there isn't any question that one of the greatest survivors- not the only survivor, there's many of them and I'm not meaning to leave anybody out- but Stone and Thomas, and Fred Horne- his father Max Horne, Horne's store, are great; Kaufman's are still hanging in there, and still do a good business. And there's many. Our office supply company is Magee and Company. Wheeling Office Supply and the Haller's, they're still here and still going fine. King's Jewelry is here. My friend Ray Schreiber and Bernhart's is still here. They burned down, but they're back in business and they'll keep right on going. And I know Ray's son, Andy, is into the business now, and I look for it to go on for another hundred years or so.

SWF: What's your feeling about riverboat gambling and Wheeling? (12.4)

JBH: Well, of course, in my day gambling was a big part of Wheeling. And I'll have to admit that liquor by the drink didn't come into being in West Virginia until 1967 or '68- legally. But I can honestly say that I only knew two bars that would not sell liquor "because it was against the law". Not only that, it was condoned. It was condoned by- by the authorities, and probably rightfully so. (12.9) The sad part of it is that along with the illegal liquor sales went a little bit of gambling, and maybe a little bit of prostitution, and maybe a little bit of other things; because it was very unpopular for a policeman to walk into a place that served liquor, so consequently they stayed out, and consequently tip-boards, punch-boards, slot machines were able to flourish for years. And that was apparently part of Bill Lias' operations, although I've known the Doeppkin brothers; I knew Jake Doeppkin and his brother, and I know Jack and Ben, and really pretty good people. I- you know, it's a business. But- And they handled it well. So, I can't- (13.8) But I remember when we voted on "liquor by the drink" one time. There were only four counties that it was for constitutional amendment. There were only four counties that voted for it, and all the rest voted against it. And that's the first time the boot-leggers and the gamblers and the preachers got together. And they defeated it in fifty-one out of fifty-five counties. Amazing. Amazing. (14.2) Riverboat gambling? I have mixed emotions about it. I went to the dog track the other night for the first time in my life. It's the first time. I said to the waitress, "This is the first time I've been here since- since the horses ran." So, some friends of mine from New York wanted to go, so they stayed over an extra day and I went with them. And I never dreamed a dog race only lasted thirty-one seconds. I was just absolutely- I- I couldn't believe it. If you blinked your eyes you missed the race! But it was interesting. (14.8) I didn't think it was- the races- were very well attended, because that's a big- a big place over there, and there were a number of people there,

and alot of cars in the parking lot. But then as we were leaving, I said, "They just got video lottery here-," and, of course, they advertise out on their screens- and I said, "Let's walk down. I want to see it." And I went down in that room, and my gosh! What a sea of machines! And I swear there were sixty or seventy percent of them had somebody at them. I tried. I lost a dollar and that was enough. I left this Muriel Hayfee from- and her husband, Joe- from Pine Bush, New York. Muriel won. She had nine games. That meant she got two dollars and twenty-five cents back. And she said, "I'm gonna' cash in." And I said, "Muriel, nobody cashes in two dollars and twenty-five cents!" And she said, "Look, I have more than a hundred percent profit! I'm cashing in!" (laughing) (15.8) So, we aren't very good gamblers, but it was interesting. Riverboat gambling? You hear the pros and cons of it. I've read good things, and I've read horrible things about Atlantic City. I've never been there in the "Gambling Era". I've never been to Las Vegas or Reno. I just don't know. When I saw the number of people over there putting their money in those video machines, I hope they all can afford it. I hope they weren't spending their kids' lunch money. (16.4) So I don't know what to say about it. I- I'm a free thinker. I think if there's going to be gambling, there's going to be gambling. Whether legalized riverboat gambling would enhance the treasury of the state of West Virginia, the city of Wheeling, and the county, and provide all the employment that they say it will- . I just keep an open mind about it. I wouldn't vote for it, and I wouldn't vote against it. I think I would abstain, and let the more knowledgeable people take care of that.

SWF (to Carrie Noble-Kline, attending): Do you have any questions you'd like to ask?

Carrie Noble-Kline: Tell us a little bit about the river, what you can remember as a child, and how it's changed; the riverboats. Maybe you saw a showboat, or went fishing.

JBH: Never fished in the Ohio River. It was too polluted. And one thing was, "Don't fish in the river; it's too polluted." You got to remember all our sewage went there. All the chemicals, all the waste went into the Ohio River. And it was an awful long time before it started being cleaned up. The main thing I remember about the Ohio River was the flooding. I watched many a tow boat go up and down the river. I don't ever remember any catastrophes. (17.7) As far as the showboats, I remember they used to come in occassionally, but not often. I had, in my high school days, had been to the- been to Pittsburgh and gone on the riverboats up there. And had dinner on them. And I remember one summer I worked for Isaly's Dairy store. And I think I won a contest. And one of the prizes was that you got to go and have dinner and a ride on one of the boats. I have yet to be on the "Valley Voyager", which I wouldn't want my friend, Lou Feola, to know. But many of my friends have, and I hope to do that sometime real soon. But that just wasn't an area that I'm exposed to. (18.5)

CNK: Did it used to freeze (the Ohio River)?

JBH: Oh! It would freeze solid. And the boats couldn't go up and down. Oh, it- oh, yes! Not only that, I remember many people telling me about walking across the river in the winter time, as some of the kids in high school. They got to school earlier because they could come across the river and didn't have to go up and come across the suspension bridge. And people ice skated. I remember hearing, you know, that was the place to ice skate, down on the river. It wouldn't freeze- sometimes it wouldn't freeze completely, but it would freeze enough along the shore-lines

to- . And there was alot of ice skating. I never ice skated on it. But I skated on the pond at Wheeling Park, and I think at Schenk Lake in Oglebay Park. But I never, never ice skated on the river. [[Return to Top](#)] (19.3)

CNK: Did you spend much time in those parks?

JBH: In the parks?

CNK: Yeah.

JBH: Oh, yes! That was, you know, Wheeling Park. And the birds, and the monkeys, and the animals, and the ducks, and especially- . And then Oglebay; I remember in my adult life when people have asked me if I belonged to the Country Club and I said, "Lord, no. I belong to the poor man's country club, Oglebay Park!" You know, that's where the dances went on, even in high school. And Wheeling Park, you know, just had the Pavilion. It didn't have what you see out there now. But the- Oglebay, especially after the Pine Room, there were high school dances, and there were all- even after the war, there were formal dances, and Saturday-night dances. (20.0) And then our children, they all belonged to the 4-H, and the- . And I remember that the daughters worked at Wilson Lodge, in the restaurant in the summertime when they were in college. I think even my son worked there one summer as a busboy. And Oglebay had, you know, the children's camps. And that- that was- that was our life. That was a very, very important part of the family in the late 50's, 60's, and 70's. And after that they all grew up and all went away. (20.6) But when they came back, and when they come back, we would go with the grandchildren. And I've retained my membership at the- in the Good Zoo for years and years and years. [[Return to Top](#)] But the grandchildren- The oldest granddaughter just graduated from high school. The oldest grandson graduated from Wake Forest University a couple of years ago. The next oldest is a junior at West Virginia Wesleyan. So, I don't have any- Now I have to wait for the great-grandkids to come to take them to Oglebay. But I remember going to the zoo, and riding the train, and- One thing I missed in talking was that after I came back out of World War II and got married, we had our first child. (21.3) I don't remember whether it was a minister, or who it was, asked me if I would serve as the assistant Boy Scout master at Edgewood Park Methodist Church. And I did, and the scout-master was Bill Fitch, that I knew and liked very much. And I have to think of my boy scouts. And one of them, he's spoken of me very- made me feel real good, and that's Randy Worls. Another one's Bob Hazlett, the stockbroker. Another one's Doctor Charlie Pontesson. (And) Donnie Dodge. I can, you know, I- and- Some of them acknowledge that I was- Randy has said it openly a time or two when he's seen me sitting in an audience. And he's made me feel ten foot tall. (21.9) So, when I got saddled with having this reunion (of the 24th Marine Regiment, September 1994 at Oglebay Park), I called Randy and told him what I was up against, and he said, "When you make up your mind, you call me." And I did. And he put Barbara Good in touch with me, and it went from there. And we had some bumps along the way, but we got them all straightened out. And it just- the reunion just went beautifully. It- even the weather was just beautiful, just beautiful. (22.4) I took them down to Independence Hall, and that's the first time I got in to see the movie, and to hear the whole story, and to take the tour like- I'd been in it many times. How interesting, how interesting.

CNK: How you got into a job again, when you got out of the service and got back to Wheeling, can you talk about that?

JBH: Yes. Yes, I- You ready? (to SWF, adjusting recorder controls) (22.9) Well I came back and they had what they called "52-20", that meant as a veteran you could draw twenty dollars a week for fifty-two weeks. You didn't have to do anything for it. All you had to do was to go down to apply for it at the Department of Employment Security. And I remember going down and I think somebody told me, "You got to have your discharge with you." So I took my Marine Corps discharge. I'd received a medical discharge and was out just before the end of World War II. (23.3) And the lady looked at it and she raised a big rubber stamp. And she put the stamp into the ink pad (he thumps loudly on the desk) and she raised the stamp, and I grabbed my discharge back. And I said, "What are you going to do?" She says, "Well, I have to stamp this and sign it to show that you've applied for your twenty dollars a week." I said, "There's no place on there for that stamp." She said, "I know. I just put it right here (indicating the entire surface of the discharge certificate)." I said, "No, ma'am!" I gave up the twenty dollars a week because I didn't want to have my discharge spotted! (laughing) (23.7) So I went to the- I said, "Can I apply for a job?" And they said I could. And I got a job with a company, and I didn't- I couldn't do that because I had a bad arm and I couldn't do that work very well. So, I went to work for another company, but somebody encouraged me to put my application at Wheeling Electric Company, which is now Wheeling Power Company. And I did, and they hired me. (24.1) And I worked there a year and a half. And to this day, the ones that are still alive, they were the nicest people I ever worked with. It was just like my friends in the Marine Corps. They were just all great people then, and they're still great people today. And I still see some of the fellows that worked at the company when I did. Some worked in my department. And we always have a story to tell each other, and always exchange cordial greetings. (24.5) But my brother, Bill, had come back from the Air Force and went to work for my father, who was in the insurance business, had an insurance agency. And Bill kept coming to my house and bringing me all this information on how to sell hospital insurance- which, of course, you know today is health insurance- encouraging me to go to work for Dad. I could go to work for him with a "G.I. On-The-Job Training". And I had to take schooling. And with the little bit my dad could pay me, and what they'd pay me on the job training, I could make about a hundred dollars more a month than I was making at Wheeling Electric Company. So I decided to go into the insurance business. (25.0) I never realized that my brother, Bill, really wanted to get out of the insurance business. And after I was there about six weeks he told his dad that he never liked that business, he couldn't sell intangibles, and he was going to go open a gas station. So, I stayed in the insurance business. And that's- it's now been, it will soon be forty-eight years since I went into the insurance business. And I operated the family agency until 1965, and sold, and went to work for Lee C. Paul Insurance, Incorporated. And I was there until seven years after Gaston Caperton, McDonough Caperton, bought Lee C. Paul, Incorporated. I then came over here to Berry-Bippus-Chison & Foose. (25.6) So, I still have some of the same customers I started with forty and forty-five years ago. And alot younger people. But it's been a very nice business. Pretty nice life.

CNK: Thank you.

[END INTERVIEW-SWF]

