

Susan Turner Halt
Oral History Interview
Marshall Public Library
James Jones Day
May 18, 2006

EM: My name is Eleanor Macke and we are recording for an oral history project at Marshall Public Library. This is May 18, 2006, and the recordings today are being done in conjunction with the program given about the Handy Writers' Colony in Marshall. I would ask you first to give us your name and address.

STH: My name is Susan Turner Halt and I live in Montgomery Alabama.

EM: OK. Susan, I have known you for a long time and I am so glad that you are here to share with us today. First of all what is your connection with the Handy Writers' Colony?

STH: Lowney Turner Handy was my aunt. My father was Andy Turner who was Aunt Lowney's youngest brother.

EM: And approximately what years was your connection with the colony? Would you have some idea?

STH: I can remember being so little. I can remember them building the colony. I remember them going out there and building the colony. In fact, my sister has pictures of us just in our underwear running around in the colony while they are building it. And also I remember them putting the pool in and putting the concrete pool in out there, and...

EM: So about what year would that have been?

STH: I think I was around – my first memories of it, I think, were around five years old, so that would have been around probably '50 - '51 - somewhere around there.

EM: So that was really at the official beginning of the colony?

STH: Right.

EM: Do you have any special memories of James Jones?

STH: We have very special memories. My sisters Terry and Sally and myself and my cousins Lauren and Judy were invited out to the colony. Well, my aunt Lowney was always glad to see us when we came to the colony, but Jim, especially, was good to us when we came to the colony. He was always taking time with us. He loved children, and they had put up – they had a huge trampoline, which was very unusual at that time for someone to have their own trampoline, and Jim taught us trampoline lessons. So we – we were very good on the trampoline. He - Jim was very, very – he was a very good trampolinist himself. So we knew all the front drops and seat drops and we could do – and he did a wonderful... He had a trampoline trick that he did that he did which he did a back flip and did a twist in the air. I think it was called the Branea or something. That was the one thing that he kept trying to teach us. But he was – he had the other writers be spotters around the trampoline so that we were safe and then he also had a special belt that he put on us when he was teaching us a new trick so that we wouldn't get hurt. But we all learned trampoline lessons.

They did have the first swimming pool in Marshall. It was a concrete swimming pool that actually the writers helped build. It had a diving board, and it was a very professional diving board – one that you could make adjustments to - to what your weight was and the dive you were going to do. 'Cause Jim was an excellent diver and so he taught us diving lessons – all we girls. And he also took the time, which is very unusual, I think, for an unmarried man that doesn't have children. And Jim was very in to chess. He liked to play chess, and he taught us all how to play chess and, in fact, gave us our very first chess set that we grew up with. So we have wonderful fond memories of Jim. And he was just always kind with us. He was always so happy to see us. He really did love children. And I think that we were probably one of the few children that he was around because of Aunt Lowney and very strict about who went in to the colony and who went out of the colony. And I think because my mom - my dad and Aunt Lowney had such a good relationship they were just really good friends and really just enjoyed each other's company. And, in fact, my dad lived with my aunt while he was in high school – he and Harry. And Harry loved children, too. With them not having children he was always happy to see us out there. He was just a very generous, generous man. And it was just a fun place to

go. It was a happy place to go. And we just – it was like going into another little world because it was all woods and little cabins and a big – they had built a big Ramada right outside the pool that was all screened in and that's where they all ate. It had a huge kitchen and a huge big fireplace and that's where all the writers congregated. And they would cook a big meal and we would all get to sit around with them. And it was just a – it was really a kind of a fairyland type of place for a child, because we had never been around anything like that and had never seen anything like that. And I think the same way with - when Jim built his dream house. It was something. We children had never seen any type of house like that. It was a huge - as you walked in it was a huge great room which you see in houses today but you didn't see in the fifties. And it had one whole wall was a huge fireplace and then he had a like a stereo system set up and – but books, books everywhere. And we just thought it was – well, my sister thought he was a movie star and this was a movie star's house. But I can remember fun little things, though, that we children were – you know, you're brought up in this strict – well, strict Catholic family. My mom was a very devout Catholic. And when we walked in to Jim's bathroom – to see his bathroom - here was this etched glass of a naked woman and we just tee-heed. We girls thought, "Oh, my goodness, this is..." You know we'd never seen anything like this. Mom wouldn't approve of this. And not only did he have a regular toilet but he also had a bidet, which we children didn't even know what it was. But we children loved to flush it and see the – it was like a little fountain shooting up and we thought that was really fun. Jim got a big kick out of us liking that. And upstairs – which was – you know, people didn't have exercise rooms then and he had this full exercise room that had like wooden bars across one whole wall that he called his stretching bars. And he had a boxing bag up there because he was a good boxer, too. And then at the other end of his exercise room was his bar. And we kids – he had this secret button that he showed us that if we pushed that button the wall would open up secretly and there was a little hiding area back there. There was a little room back there and we kids thought that was our special hiding area in Jim's house. And I think it was actually where he stored his liquor, but he let us believe that was our special place in his house. But he always made us feel welcome and always was happy to see us. So it was a - we have really, really fond memories of Jim Jones. And we were – we got to meet Gloria and, you know, that was some of the people he wanted – he

wanted all of us kids to meet Gloria, because he was very much in love with her. And we got to meet all, you know, the other writers and...

EM: Did you have a connection with the colony after Jim Jones had gone?

STH: We did. Well, Aunt Lowney still lived out there. So we went out there and saw her. She became quite ill, though, and - but we did go out and see Aunt Lowney out there, but it was never the same after Jim left.

EM: Did Harry live there, also? I know - did Lowney build a house or did she move into Jim's house?

STH: Lowney had a little house out there, also. It wasn't near the - you know, it was more of a cap - you know. It was a regular house, but it was a little green house with I think it had white shutters, but it was just a regular house with a bedroom and, you know, kitchen and everything. But it did have a big room that had just books everywhere. There were always books everywhere in her house. And the fact - yeah, Harry lived there. In fact, my memory is that the original land was actually belonged to Harry's mother. And that's what the colony was built on, if I remember right. But we saw Mrs. Handy, too, you know. She was - she was part of the family.

EM: That would be Harry's mother?

STH: Harry's mother, uh-huh.

EM: Did she live near by or....?

STH: She still lived in Robinson is my understanding - if I remember right. But they would bring her out to the colony. But it was just a - it was a different place because it was... Lowney kept it private. Not everyone was allowed to go to the colony. It was - you know - she made her writers work. And not only did they work, but they worked on the colony. They worked keeping the grounds up, and they worked - they did physical work, as well. She was very strict about... You know, we weren't allowed out there when it was writing time. You know, this was... When they had their break time was when, you know, she wanted us kids to come out.

EM: Now did you have a close relationship with any of the other writers?

STH: Tom – I can't say his last name – Chamales, I think it is – really liked we kids, also. And he moved to New York and wrote a book. And we also got to meet his wife when he got married. And that was – and Sonny Daly. We knew Sonny from growing up here and of course his sister, Barbara Daly.

EM: He was a Marshall native?

STH: He was a Marshall native and his sister, Barbara, was our preschool teacher when we were growing up. So, you know, the Dalys were friends of our family for years. So I remember Sonny Daly. But that's probably all of the writers I really remember.

EM: Do you remember Jim ever coming back to see Lowney after he moved away – he and - after he married and moved away?

STH: No, I don't remember that. But then, you know, you grow up and get busy in your own life, and, you know, then the colony is not such a unique... You know, you get in your own little activities and....

EM: Did your dad remain friends with Jim?

STH: Yes. They wrote letters and they talked on the phone. And my dad and Jim were always good friends. Dad understood how Lowney was with Jim and... Dad and Jim would just go out and have a good time together – the two of them – so that was... They always had a good relationship. So we did...

EM: Can you think of any other stories about the colony or about James Jones that you would like to share?

STH: I can't think of anything right now. I just want them to know that these – I hear these things about Lowney being such a different person. She was just a – she was just a very creative person and was in this little town that was a pretty conservative little town. And – but I don't think she ever – you know - I think she just had goals. And for a person to be independent in that time was so unusual. And to go ahead with

something that she had a goal to do and did, and... But she was just a very free spirit. As you heard the black author say, you know, she didn't care about your race, what your... You know if you really wanted to learn to write she was willing to help teach you. And I think that was - she was really unique for that. And I think the things people don't know about Jim - you hear about him being such a rebel and all this - but he was a very kind and loving man and he loved children. And I don't think people see that side of him, but he was very loving with we children.

EM: That's great. Well, if there's nothing else you'd like to add I really appreciate your coming in today and helping with our oral history project.

STH: Thank you very much.

Charles Gamm
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My name is Eleanor Macke and we are recording for an oral history project at Marshall Public Library. This is May 18, 2006, and the recordings today are being done in conjunction with the program given about the Handy Writers' Colony in Marshall.

EM: Can you tell me your name, please, and your address?

CG: Charles Gamm. Marshall, Illinois.

EM: OK. Charlie, I would like to know what your connection is with either James Jones or the Handy Writers' Colony.

CG: Just as a teenager we were like everyone else. We were warned to stay away from the writers' colony, but that just said, like, "Sic'em!" you know. And so with two of my buddies why we'd sneak in the back and we thought that was fun to watch them having parties back there and swimming in the pool. We watched them do that, you know, quite a bit during the fifties – middle fifties, I think it was. And then later on – well, about that same time period we used to have the theater here in town. I'd go there and Jimmy Jones would be there. I had become an Elvis fan later on, and looking back - the entourage that Elvis had - this was the same thing Jimmy had and they'd take up two rows of seats. And he'd send them back for popcorn. And I'm sure he's the one that bought. But they'd sit there and laugh at the adult things on the screen. And we were laughing at them and watching them more than the movie. And it was funny to see them. But Jimmy was in the – like some other people said, he seemed odd to the rest of us. But we were more in awe of him more than anything. And of course, being a lot older he hit up the bars and all that. We weren't into that, but we'd watch them as they went down the street. But later on I – my house was built by the same fellow that built Jimmy's house and I rode a motorcycle with Johnny Snedeker, the fellow that was the main contractor. And I heard many tales about the motorcycles that both the Jones and the Snedeker family was involved in. And I got to relive that with them - especially that –

Johnny Snedeker, he liked to ride through the creeks and Jimmy Jones liked to do that too. But he was afraid to put his bike through the middle of the creek like the other guys were doing, so he'd do a real timid one and they tended to make fun of him. But they didn't want to get too carried away with that, either. But we had several associations that I wasn't involved – I got that second hand. But the same period I was a gun nut. And I couldn't afford the things that I know he had but he had – there was traveling gun men came across the country and they would stop at Jimmy's house and he'd buy what he wanted to from them.

EM: So these were people that bought and sold firearms.

CG: Right, I'm talking about good stuff. And we were going to a gun show one time and there was a pair of Colt forty-fives with the holsters and all of them. And it wasn't too bad. Back then a Colt single action was one hundred twenty-five dollars. And the whole set wasn't sold for about two hundred bucks. But that was a lot of money back then. And that's kind of along the same deal. We're sitting in a room is the back part of what used to be Kroger's in Marshall, Illinois. And it closed in sixty-one. But in fifty-seven when James Jones married Gloria, she shopped here. 'Cause they're the ones that had money and they bought quality items and all. And several times she had a pretty good sized order and I'd carry the groceries out and I'd put them in a car for her and she tried to tip me twenty dollars several times. And she just – it just amazed here that I wouldn't take any money. But twenty bucks was like a hundred dollars now. That was a lot of money. But I wouldn't take any money and she couldn't get that.... And we'd looked at her – we knew that she was just different. She was pretty but just in kind of a different way from the local girls. I don't know any other tales to tell you.

EM: OK.

CG: ...if that will do you any good or not.

EM: Were you familiar or did you know any of the other writers at the colony?

CG: They probably came in, but I – honestly, I just didn't know them.

EM: Yeah. OK. Well...

CG: I did deliver groceries to some of the families that were involved – the Turner family, especially. [Added later by Charlie: The Turner family was Loney Handy's brother's family. Loney was Dr. Jim Turner's aunt.]

EM: Yes.

CG: Thank you.

EM: Thank you very much. I appreciate it.

