

Interviewer: Stacey Guthrie  
Interviewee: Mr. Dwight Connelly

Taken February 20, 1998

**Stacey Guthrie:** Interview for Renee' Davis, Stacey Guthrie, and Ben Elliott

**Stacey Guthrie:** How did the Writers' Colony get its start?

**Mr. Dwight Connelly:** "Basically the Writers' Colony got its start in Robinson, Illinois. It grew out of Lowney Turner Handy's interest in helping young people write. And of course, the first number one person was James Jones. And he was in Robinson toward the end of W.W. II or at least during W.W. II. He had been wounded one time, was in the hospital and sort of went AWOL. He went to Robinson which was his hometown and Lowney kind of took him in and it grew from there."

**Stacey Guthrie:** Who were the people involved with the occupation of the Colony?

**Mr. Dwight Connelly:** "Basically the Colony was originally financed by Lowney's husband, called Hap, was his first name. I don't remember his first name offhand but her husband pretty much financed the Colony to start with. And it gradually moved from Robinson up to Marshall. And the Colony was located in the southwest part of Marshall. And it basically, this was Lowney's husband's, mother's property. Lowney's mother-in-law's farm actually. And in fact, the mother tried some writing also; she was kind of a semi-member of the Colony. And at various times during the winter when most of the Colony moved off to warmer climates. One or two of the writers could stay with Mrs. Handy, the wife of Sol Handy who used to be a legislator from this area."

**Stacey Guthrie:** Did the death of a relative to one of the members play a role in the end of the Colony?

**Mr. Dwight Connelly:** "Which death are you referring to?"

**Stacey Guthrie:** A sister to one of the members.

**Mr. Dwight Connelly:** "OK, you are thinking about James Jones' sister, her name was MaryAnn. No, it did not play a role in the death of the Colony. It was a sad time for Jones because, uh, this was when everything was perking up for him. He was doing well, and starting to get some recognition. He was ready to celebrate what he had. And, uh, his sister who was a member of the Colony, also a writer, had a seizure, I think and, uh, kind of got tied up in bed-clothing and so forth. And they found her, and she was dead. That didn't really have any effect on the Colony, it went on."

**Stacey Guthrie:** Did she die in the Colony?

**Mr. Dwight Connelly:** "Yes, she died in the Colony."

**Stacey Guthrie:** What type of literature did the Colony write?

**Mr. Dwight Connelly:** "Uh, basically the Colony wrote fiction material, uh, which was novels for the most part. They also did magazine articles. Type of writing tended to be, uh, masculine. Women were as in characters, probably were not, uh, respected very much as characters. It was kind of man's type of writing, and, part of that goes back to James Jones and also Lowney herself. Who seemed to have a very low opinion of women."

**Stacey Guthrie:** How was the Colony funded?

**Mr. Dwight Connelly:** "Uh, in the very beginning the Colony was funded by Mr. Handy, Lowney's husband. Who was a superintendent at the Oil Company in Robinson? He had a pretty good salary. She apparently had a lot of influence over him. So he funded it, and moved a cabin up from Marathon, moved bricks up from Marathon and different things like that to get the Colony started. Once From Here to Eternity was completed and sold, James Jones provided most of the support for the Colony after that."

**Stacey Guthrie:** What were some of the influences put upon the members of the Colony?

**Mr. Dwight Connelly:** "Uh, what do you mean by that?"

**Stacey Guthrie:** Influences of the community on other members.

**Mr. Dwight Connelly:** "What pressures they were under and that sort of thing?"

**Stacey Guthrie:** Yes.

**Mr. Dwight Connelly:** "The community was kind of suspicious of the Colony to some extent, although, uh, one member of the Colony, Edwin Sunny Daily, was a student here at Marshall High School. And he actually, apparently, got to skip classes in the afternoons or it might have been the mornings. Sometime during the day, he would go to the Colony as part of his English classes, apparently. And he ended up writing a couple of books or novels. One called Some Must Watch and I don't remember what the other one was, but two novels, for the most part. I think the townspeople looked out there and thought there is a bunch of weirdoes because later on they had some black members. Who also ended up writing novels. Uh, Jones himself would tool around on a motorcycle and dress in Indian jewelry and things like that. And Lowney was kind of a character. The townspeople kind of looked at the Colony as being of a bit on the weird side. Uh, and for Lowney's part. She didn't particularly like people at the Colony; she thought people at the Colony were distracting. Some of their relatives would come and so forth. So I would say that the influences on the Colony were pretty much, uh, they were treated as outsiders for the most part. They didn't really integrate. Lowney would not let the people out of the Colony for any length of time. Except maybe to go to the grocery store for her or something like that. Or about once a month she would let them go to Terre

Haute and, uh, let off steam and that sort of thing. But for the most part they didn't interact with the community."

**Stacey Guthrie:** What were some of the reasons why the movie From Here to Eternity caused the Colony to form?

**Mr. Dwight Connelly:** "OK, the movie was not the reason for the start of the Colony. The Colony started while Jones was still finishing up From Here to Eternity as a book, as a novel. And it was published, and I think he got \$80,000 dollars from the movie rights. But the Colony was already going at that point. It helped the Colony, but it didn't start the Colony."

**Stacey Guthrie:** How many total people were involved in the Colony?

**Mr. Dwight Connelly:** "Oh, gee that would be kind of hard to say. At any given time probably no more than maybe ten or eleven at the most. I think they had well, maybe more than that. Because they had two different barracks five rooms in each barrack. And then once in a while they would have tents pitched. And Jones had his own trailer. And then Lowney eventually had her own trailer. And, the, uh, later on Jones of course built the house. That, uh, I don't know if you have seen the house or not. But, uh, it was a quite elaborate house. It cost probably \$75 or \$80,000 dollars. Which was a lot of money back then."

**Stacey Guthrie:** Who were the most famous members of the Colony?

**Mr. Dwight Connelly:** "Well, of course, the most famous member was James Jones. And, uh, Tom Gameles, who wrote a book. He was married to a singer or a movie star. I forget what it was now. And he died in a hotel fire. Apparently, under some pretty suspicious conditions. He was researching something that people thought shouldn't be researched. And some people think he was murdered. But the authorities never did actually determine that. So he was famous. Jere Peacock was fairly well known. Don Sackrider, one of the first members of the Colony, never became a writer. But went on to be an airplane pilot. He apparently made some money or something. Any way he is very active today in supporting the James Jones Literary Society. Which is still going strong. But there were several novels that came out of the Colony. You might check that handout or that thing from the book, it lists probably some of the better-known novels, that came out in the Colony, if not I can find them for you."

**Stacey Guthrie:** Did the members reside in the Colony? Did they live in the barracks and cabins?

**Mr. Dwight Connelly:** "Uh, yes they did, they lived at the Colony. But mostly, in the summer. Bad weather hit some went back to college, if they were college students. Some went to work some place. The very best ones or the ones who were really almost finishing their books up might go with Jim Jones and Lowney. To Arizona or California or Florida for a kind of winter. It was just too cold to stay here in the winter, there wasn't

any heat in the Colony at all. Like I say one or two of them might stick around and stay at the Colony at all. Like I say one or two of them might stick around and stay in the Colony with Mrs. Handy. Who lived in a big house there? It was her farm."

**Stacey Guthrie:** When exactly did the Colony begin, and when did it end?

**Mr. Dwight Connelly:** "I'm not positive what year it actually started. Somewhere around the end of W.W. II, must have been around 1945-1946 somewhere in there, probably. And it essentially for practical purposes ended when Jim Jones married a woman from New York. Gloria, I forgot what her last name was. When they came back from working on his second book, Some Came Running. And Gloria and Lowney got into a big argument, Jim and Gloria moved off. They lived in New York for awhile and then went to Paris. And the Colony just pretty much went downhill at that point."

**Stacey Guthrie:** What did the community think about the Colony?

**Mr. Dwight Connelly:** "Uh, as I said before they were thought of as a bunch of hippies or Beatniks. They were kind of suspicious of it."

**Stacey Guthrie:** What happened to the members of the Colony after it ended?

**Mr. Dwight Connelly:** "Well, the ones who were writers kept on trying to be writers, as far as I know. Some were never members of the Colony as residents. But they corresponded, like John Sheroda who now lives out in Los Angeles, he has done some work with television and movies and stuff like that. Sunny Daily, after he wrote his two novels became a headmaster of a private school in California. As I say, Don Sackrider became, uh, an airplane pilot. They just kind of all went in different directions. John Bowers who wrote a book about the Colony, called The Colony is still in New York. Last I heard from him, he was an editor of a magazine. So many of them have stayed in publications some have not."

**Stacey Guthrie:** What was the legacy left by the Colony?

**Mr. Dwight Connelly:** "Gee, tough question. A legacy, uh, I don't know, I think Marshall has just about forgotten about the Colony. I know the local historical society, as far as I know, has done very little with it. And maybe it hasn't left as much legacy as it should have. We do have a writing award given at Honors night every year. The Lowney Turner Handy Writers Award or something like that. But, by and large, I think maybe, uh, there isn't maybe that much legacy locally. There should be; maybe there will be after this project."

**Stacey Guthrie:** Were the members involved in any other activities besides the Colony?

**Mr. Dwight Connelly:** "Uh, I don't think so. Not that I am aware of. Jones may have toiled around on his motorcycle. But I wouldn't have called that very much of an activity. Sometimes he would play tennis at a local tennis court. But most of the local

Colony members stayed in the Colony. If they did go out for recreation, they went to Terre Haute."

#### Questions Added

**Stacey Guthrie:** What happened to the cabins and the barracks? There is a rumor that they burned down.

**Mr. Dwight Connelly:** "I've not heard of any rumor that they burned down. The big building called the "Ramada" was where they ate and cooked and so forth. I don't know if it is still there or not. But, some of the buildings are still there. If you go over there and look they have probably been converted into something else. I've not heard of any of them burning down. Some of them may have been torn down. Jones built a house. They spent quite a lot of money on it. It is an interesting house. There is a fireplace and opposite the fireplace is a stairway. The stairway was his place for mounting guns. Jones was a great gun fanatic you might say. And then there is even a secret room. Nobody for sure knows what that little secret room was used for, but you can kind of crawl past the bar and go back in there. It was a man's house. But, unusual, expensive, very well wired electrically. I'm not sure why it should cost \$80,000 but it did. That was a lot of money back then."