

**James Day**

Where: JL Day Sign Company

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Location: 3225 Georges Drive  
Saint Albans, WV 25177

Interviewer: Emily Hilliard

Transcription: Emily Hilliard

Length: 30:03

**James L. Day**

James Day (July 5, 1932-April 12, 2019) was the owner of JL Day Sign Company in St. Albans, WV. He made hand-bent neon signs for nearly 60 years and was one of the last hand tube benders in the Kanawha Valley.

In 2018, the West Virginia Folklife Program worked with West Virginia Public Broadcasting to produce audio and video documentaries about Day. View them at <https://wvfolklife.org/2018/09/04/st-albans-artisan-has-been-making-neon-signs-by-hand-for-five-decades-a-profile-of-james-l-day/>

Video: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cCe99a7ke50&feature=emb\\_title](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cCe99a7ke50&feature=emb_title)

Audio: <https://soundcloud.com/wvpublicnews/wva-artisan-has-been-making-neon-signs-by-hand-for-five-decades>

Read Day's obituary here: <https://www.dignitymemorial.com/obituaries/saint-albans-wv/james-day-8250954>

JD: James Day

EH: Emily Hilliard

00:00

EH: Alright. So why don't you introduce yourself and tell me who you are and where you're from?

JD: OK. I'm... I'm (laughs) I'll have to remember... okay!

EH: (laughs)

JD: I'm James Day, originally, originally from Ohio, next to Cincinnati. My wife was from St. Albans and I just lost here in March of this year, yeah. But we was married 60 years in August.

EH: Wow

JD: And I had it announced on the Cincinnati Reds game. Our anniversary.

EH: Aw.

JD: So everybody thought it was kinda cool, you know, but anyhow. We had 2 girls—we lost our youngest one. The oldest one still lives with me. The oldest daughter, yeah.

EH: You said that you have 16 brothers and sisters?

JD: Uh-huh. All of 'ems living except two boys. The oldest one and the one brother that drowned in the backwater—he was 9 years old at the time. We lived in New Richmond, Ohio then. Okay?

EH: And when did you move to St. Albans?

JD: I worked in Cleveland with a fella from here and he brought me home—his wife and my wife-to-be worked together at Bell Lines (?) okay? And every... just blind date and went from there on. I guess we just.... (laughs)

EH: It worked out!

JD: Yes! I guess we kinda liked each other or whatever, you know.

EH: And so how did you learn—how did you get into neon sign making?

JD: Well, I always worked in signs, I always worked with signs—usually in putting up new signs or service work. And I got interested in neon and picked it up over the years. Yes. I once... Most interesting was the fella I worked with in in Cleveland—he was from Kentucky. He was a tube bender and then I came down here after me and the wife married and I picked up neon from like... a Bentley and a Bedwall.

EH: Okay.

JD: Okay, and then mostly I learned on my own—the hard way, I guess. I guess you'd say the hard way, I reckon.

EH: And Bentley and Bedwall—that was their last name?

JD: Yes, uh-huh. One of 'em worked for Walker Carry System and the other worked for Chandler Sign Company. Yes.

EH: Do you know where in Kentucky the guy you learned from was from?

JD: Not really, no. He was a character. He'd get on the elevator and he'd scream and cry and carry on—he was a catbird! (laughs) I don't know what part of Kentucky he was from—might have been Loretta Lynn's country. I don't know! Could have been.

EH: So what about it interested you?

JD: I don't know... I don't know—just, and I enjoyed doing it. I enjoyed doing glass work—when I'm not being pushed or anything I enjoy coming down here and working on it, yeah. And if everything goes right I... I do enjoy doing it. Still... I've been doing it a long time. Hopefully I'll be doing it a longer time. (laughs) A while longer, yeah.

EH: So about when did you start doing it? What year?

JD: Probably in the after we got married—we married in '58, '57, 1957—so I guess maybe 60s, early 60s I guess, yeah.

EH: And how old are you if you don't mind me asking?

JD: Um, 85.

EH: Wow! I wouldn't have guessed.

JD: Okay. Thanks! (laughs) Thanks! I was gonna tell you something else!

EH: (laughs)

JD: I thought, well, I better not.

EH: Better not lie.

JD: No, I better not.

EH: Could you talk me through what it takes from the start of a sign to the end of a sign? To the finish of a sign?

JD: Well if somebody comes in and wants to order a sign, I'll say, well do you got anything in mind that you like—you like? Do you like neon? And if they say yes-- 'course everybody's supposed to like neon—but anyhow, I'll say, do you have anything in mind, and they'll tell me if they do and then the size, maybe a color, sometimes a color, maybe someone wants it for their game room or whatever or maybe it's a business or whatever. And then I make a... I'll usually make a sketch that they can look at—either a plastic sign or a neon—I'll make a drawing for 'em to look at it. And a scaled model. And... after that, that one there, and then we'll go from there, and then if they want it I'll make a pattern—a full sized pattern and then go from there, either neon or plastic or whatever. But that's usually, that's the way it works. And it used to be everything used to be painted—hand painted. Now it's not. I don't paint a sign maybe once in two or three years.

EH: So the paint was the background or...

JD: Mmhm.

EH: Okay.

JD: Yeah the background. On a neon sign, way we usually do it was make a metal sign—usually out of aluminum. And put the letters on there, the color—we'd make a pattern and then paint the letter—

whatever color letter it was gonna be—like if it was gonna be a red neon letter, we'd paint red letters behind there. If it was gonna be blue, we'd paint blue behind there—okay?

And now everything's from vinyl. Vinyl lettering, yeah.

6:06

EH: So then what about the actual tubes? Could you walk me through that process?

JD: The neon tubes?

EH: Yeah.

JD: K.

EH: How you bend them.

JD: Okay. I order these—I order this glass and it comes in in 4 foot lengths, unless it's special and then it comes in in 5 foot lengths. And I'll bend it up, I'll cut it and bend each letter separate. Sometimes you can do two letters at one time. But I'll bend it and I can make a word EAT—I'll make E and then the A and then T and I'll join 'em together and have an electrode on each end and I'll hook the—after it's together I'll have the tubulation either coming out the electrode or out of the side of the tube, which I'll hook on to the manifold. The manifold will pump this—or the vacuum pump will pump this into a vacuum and the impurities in that tube will burn and then when it—when it gets so hot that it cools off and it sterilizes, it'll be ready to gas. Okay, and if it doesn't have any leaks in it, it will... it will not light up when it's cooled off. Okay? And then it'll be ready to gas. And then it's—everything is hooked up on the transformer.

EH: Alright.

JD: Okay and if you had a plastic sign it would be hooked up on a ballast. Okay?

EH: And the manifold is that the expensive machinery?

JD: Yeah, that's the one I said I had money in. Which I think I do. It's made out of Pyrex, but our glass is lead glass—okay? But now they've taken all the lead out of it and it's, it's a harder glass now and it's harder to work with too since they've taken all the lead out of it. I don't work with the Pyrex—if I have to have it fixed, I send it off somewhere to get it fixed. Repaired.

EH: So the new glass is probably safer for your health?

JD: Well, I don't know—I guess. It couldn't have been that much lead in it I don't think, but they did take lead out of it. Yes.

EH: Where do you source your glass from?

JD: Either Pioneer Supply in Pittsburgh or Cincinnati or a place in Columbus—can't even think of the name of it. But anyhow, there are several—sign supply places. Where you can get the—yeah—the electrodes, everything that's connected with it. Mercury, have to order it through the sign supply too. Cant order it here—I've tried too—can't do it. Yeah.

EH: Is it regulated?

JD: Yes, it's regulated and it's expensive, yeah.

EH: And you said that you have some glass that comes from France?

JD: Yeah some of it does.

EH: Special...

JD: Yeah, it's a special glass. It is special and it's kind of expensive too and you have to buy so much of it.

9:00

I think it's wrapped up in 17 pound packages, okay? And it's quite expensive, yes, but we don't use a whole lot of it, no.

EH: What makes that special?

JD: It's 'cause it's an oval glass and it's—I guess it comes from France or some other country, yes.

EH: And it has special colors?

JD: It has the colors right into the glass, yes, uh-huh, yeah. And the other glass we use now is powdered glass- it has a colored powder on the inside of it. Or it's clear glass originally and it's colored with the different color whatever neon, whatever neon color it's gonna be—green, blue red or... yellow, orange or whatever, yeah.

EH: And... oh... so what are the colors that you work with?

JD: Most of it is red, and I do a lot of green, blues, white, a lot of 'ems white anymore, but there are several—a whole lot of different colors—shades of white. Lots of 'em—probably 10 or 11 different shades of white, which we use a lot of, a lot of white lettering behind the channel letters. A lot of it's lit up with neon, and most of it's white neon. Yeah. Mmhm.

EH: And so when you're talking about different colors of neon, that's a different type of gas?

JD: Gas AND the glass, yes, both, together.

EH: And they work together to make each shade a different shade?

JD: Right. Whatever shade you want, yes. Uh-huh.

EH: I just saw you bending tubes, but could you explain it a little bit for the interview?

JD: Well, (laughs) I try... I'll try. I have what's called a ribbon burner in there. That's a lone stretch out 18 inches long. I can make a bend 18 inches long or I can shorten it up to 3 or 4 inches long. That's the one I make my—like a letter B, and R, and O, so forth, and I make all my, most of my other letters on there too. Like the double backs on the Es and so forth. And then the crossfires—where I weld 'em together, that's where you watched me there the last time—that's where I weld everything together. And then I have one more torch—the typic (?) torch that I fasten everything to the manifold with it.

EH: And the crossfire—that's the two, there's 2 burners on it, so you're getting both pieces so you can join it?

JD: Mmhm. Yes. Yeah. That the crossfire, yeah.

EH: And for something like the eyebrow sign that you were making today—how many hours would you say you'll have in that by the time it's done?

JD: When I get done I'll have probably—I started on it this morning about 8:30 so I'll have... things didn't go very good anyhow... I'll have 4 hours on it anyhow, maybe time I get it pumped and blacked out I'll have to black out between each letter is blacked out with a special paint. Yep. So time I get done with it, I'll probably have 5 or 5 and a half hours in that one piece. Yeah. Mmhm.

EH: And how much do you charge for something like that?

JD: Well, it goes by the footage and it'll be 10 or 12 dollars a foot of what I charge for it, and the repair I have a standard prices—well depends on the... how bad they're broke up and how much glass I have to use. Yeah. A lot of it is repairs, yeah.

EH: And the foot is how much glass- because there are three or four bends—not the actual finished sign?

JD: Uh-huh. Yeah. You couldn't bend... I'll have to use a measuring wheel to get the right amount of footage, yeah. And I try to keep it under 10 feet if possible—10 feet of glass to each unit if possible. Yeah. Cause it works better on the manifold and it works better for me for gassing it and so forth.

EH: Have you seen changes in your business- like what people want, demand?

JD: Yeah, they're... yeah a lot of people are going with, instead of lighting these channel letters up with neon, a lot of people are going with LEDs now instead of neon. Yeah. And which is... a whole lot easier to work with and probably a lot cheaper too. Yeah.

EH: So you still bend the tubes but you don't put gas in it?

JD: Oh...

EH: Is that right for LED?

JD: No, the LEDs I buy them already—they're already ready to wire up, they are. And they work off a driver.

EH: But you're still bending the glass tubes for it?

JD: No, there's no glass tubes, no they'd be a channel letter—channel letter like that... let me show you...

EH: Sure.

JD: (pulls out a channel letter) It'll be a channel letter like this.

EH: okay.

JD: Okay? And of course, it'd be in a cabinet—here's one down here. It's dirty...

EH: You don't have to get that out.

JD: Here—here's one there.

EH: Got it.

JD: That's got some neon in it.

14:40

And it's white. Laying there and it's dirty. But anyhow, that's the way they're made. And it either has neon in it or LEDs yeah. And this one has neon and I'm sure... I don't know what...

EH: (laughs) And has it changed how you actually make the signs—has that changed at all?

JD: Well, anymore they're... yeah—they have machines that makes these letters up—they can run it through on the computer and the machine will make the letters up. And now as far as our old regular old neon signs, nobody even... nobody even hardly makes them anymore, okay, and they're a... well they're everybody's going to either channel letters or...mmm...

EH: So do you have other contacts with other sign makers around the country who are still doing it like you do?

JD: Yes. Well, they—I do quite a bit of neon for different sign companies all over the state, really. And when they have, when they bring some in broken or something, I repair it for them or if they need some, need new neon, I make it for 'em. Yeah. Most of the... a lot of places in West Virginia, yes. And Ohio too.

EH: So you're kind of the only guy in the...

JD: Well I guess.

EH: Ohio Valley.

JD: I reckon, yes. Yes.

EH: What are some interesting things you've made signs for before?

JD: Well, let's see...hey... caught me there off guard. I've made some interesting signs but I don't know what they were... what they... I made some... I don't know—gotta be truthful with ya. I don't know! (laughs) Different names. See there's--- I've made some funny names but I can't remember off hand what some of 'em was. Like... shooo I don't know. I don't know. Right off hand I can't think of anything, but...

EH: A lot of hot dog stands?

JD: Yes, several, yes.

EH: I saw those.

JD: Mmhm.

EH: Bammy's Chili Dog

JD: Yes, Mmhm.

EH: Chris'

JD: Chris', yes, and there's one out at Corridor G I done for—Zippy.

EH: Oh yeah, I haven't been out there yet.

JD: Okay, well it has... I don't think they're even open now. I don't know whether they closed down or what happened. I think he did... yeah.

EH: Um... what did your parents do? Let's go back a little bit to...



JD: 'Course my mother was a house wife and raised kids. (laughs) My dad was a barber, my dad was a barber and he worked at Alice Chalmers in Cincinnati. As a rotor balancer. They made electric motors there, not tractors. Not tractors. Let me go over there and look at pictures. Lemme see if there's something in there maybe that's unusual.

EH: Oh yeah.

JD: I know I've made some silly stuff!

18:23

I can't remember off hand what. I don't try to misspell very many though.

EH: Does that happen?

JD: It has before, has before—yeah. Or make one backwards. I've done that, I've done that before too, and left a word out. But no, I don't know of... I'll see if I can see anything in here that's unusual. (Flips through scrapbook) Okay I have made some of these, made these Giovanni men...their logo men. I may have a picture of one in here, maybe. They're kind of... and the Alban Theater, that's in front of it, yeah that's the front of it. Yeah, I made these open signs that are different colors. Yeah. And there's one I made for my... my niece, my niece and her husband. They live over in Ohio, I made it for their birthday or wedding anniversary I think it was. Yeah. Suzi's, one for the post office, here's one back...

EH: I've seen that post office one.

JD: Oh did ya?

EH: Yep.

JD: Uh-huh. Got pictures here of... pictures I took of the floodwall in Portsmouth. Have you ever looked at those?

EH: No.

JD: Oh, they're fabulous. I think somebody from Canada comes down and paints those if I'm not mistaken, and they're great. Just unreal. There's another one—the Alban Theater. It hasn't had any neon in years. Maybe I can find something and maybe I can't.

EH: That's okay—it's neat to see what all you've done. (coughs) So the Alban Theater doesn't have neon in their sign anymore?

JD: Yes it does, yes, uh-huh. I've done several sides too like those here. Stone and Thomas, that's the neon, I made neon for it. Another church sign there. There's some channel letter signs there, yeah. This is that theater. The sign back here on the wall, this is... now we're getting into this, this is Giovanni's. But that, now I got, should have a picture of his logo too—his man, logo man. But I made—he's got 4 of these on his building down there in Logan. I've made all 4 of them and the Spotted Hen—there's one I made, never did... I don't know that I'm gonna find anything or not.

EH: These are all my favorite signs in town!

JD: I guess, yeah.

22:21

I've almost sure I had one of the pictures of...

EH: Does Taylor Books have one? I know they have one that says Taylor's...

JD: Yeah, they have one that says Taylor, yeah. I made that for her a long time ago—it's made out of aquamarine or something like that. It's a nice color. That's Stone and Thomas and Jerry Adkins. And this is helicopter we painted on the parking lot. Subway, I don't know. And then we done—I used to do the ballpark when they had, when Watt Powell was there. I don't know if I'm gonna find anything or not.

EH: That's okay...it's neat to see.

JD: There's one of 'em. (points to sign of a female figure for a strip club)

EH: Do you do shapes like that a lot?

JD: Uh-huh that went to a... um... town right outside of Parkersburg...um...right before you get...

EH: Marietta?

JD: Yeah, Marietta. Right before you get to... buddy of mine has a club up there and I made it for him. Where he can make all that money.

EH: Yeah.

JD: And there's our deer population back behind our house here (points to photos of deer). We have one, two, three—three deers here. We still get deer coming through here all the time.

EH: Have you made them any neon signs?

JD: Have I what?

EH: Made them neon signs?

JD: No! (laughs) I haven't. They haven't ordered anything yet—they haven't ordered yet. Steak Escape, I done several of these and... this shows signs that we've done over the years. The Back Express, one at Marmet, Subway, there's a Happy Days Diner down in... can't think of the name of the town that it's in now. It's in down in next to Matewan down in there somewhere, but I can't think of that name, for some reason I can't. But I guess that's all there is here. Shew. Can't find any...

EH: That's okay! Those are interesting to me. Um... well, I'd like to come back sometime with video people, but let me see- so are you in here pretty much every day all day during the week?

JD: It depends on what I've got to do. If I've got a lot of neon to do, I'm usually here, yeah. Mmhm. Yeah.

EH: And so is it a pretty hazardous job because of the burns and cuts?

JD: Well, I guess it could be, yeah, I guess it could be, yeah. Mmhm. You get shocked there once in a while.

EH: Oh—from the...

JD: From the transformers on the electric. Anytime you're working with electric—it goes along with it. But you know, as long as you're not standing in water, you should be alright! (laughs)

EH: Yeah, what about the mercury?

JD: Well, I don't... the mercury that I use is just a drop, now I put a drop. I built.... I make me a mercury trap and I put a drop of mercury in that trap and I don't put it in the tube until the tube is cooled off and gassed and then I'll dump the mercury in the tube. But I can't put the mercury in the tube and then bombard it. When I put it on the manifold back there, the tube is bombarded.

EH: What does that mean?

JD: It's bombarded—all the impurities are burned out of it. It's in a vacuum, and then after... like I said, after it's sterilized, it'll... you can gas it. But if it gets mercury in it, I'll dump it in after it cools. After I gas it and it's cooled off.

EH: And what does it mean to gas it—you pump in the gas?

JD: Pump the gas, yes uh-huh.

EH: And then it remains in there?

JD: Remains in there—I'll seal it off from the manifold, yeah. Mmhm.

EH: And does it last forever?

JD: Well, I've had 'em in here 75 years longtime. I had a Ford sign, I don't know how it was—it had two or three tubes on it, it was still burning. I don't know how old it was, maybe 100. I don't know! The first neon sign that was ever made I think was in 19 and 9—was a Packard sign in California somewhere, from what I understand—yes. Okay. The oldest one that I've heard about, yeah.

EH: And then what would you say would be the peak of neon signs... oops! Be careful. What would you say would be the peak—would that be around the 50s or 60s?

JD: I would think, yeah. It's... neon is big in some parts of the country like Vegas. I think it's even big in New York. I think so yeah. And of course you know it's big out there. And they have the—some of them bigger signs has a neon plant right in the bottom of the signs. Where they can repair 'em or whatever.

EH: Yeah, I like the old vintage ones.

JD: Yeah, and they have museums out there too with the old neon signs.

EH: Have you been to them?

JD: No, I've only been out there once. I would like to go, though. Yeah, sure. Yeah.

EH: Well is there anything else you'd like to add?

JD: No, just don't tell anybody how old I am, will ya? (laughs)

EH: I won't!

JD: Let 'em guess! (laughs)

EH: I'll keep it a secret.

JD: Let 'em guess. That's what I tell everybody anyhow—I say, well how old do you think I am? They'll say, oh, you're 70 or so. I'll say, that's good enough. Close enough.

EH: (laughs)

JD: Just don't tell 'em.

EH: Well thank you so much!

JD: That's alright. I hope I didn't embarrass you.

EH: No, not at all! This is really neat.

JD: Well...these fellas were here a while ago—they want this sign here. And I'll make this, make this out of channel letters, then they want them dots around there too. Make them put that in there.

EH: And that will be the just... tubes, heating and cooling part?

JD: Yeah, they've got four—four things underneath there, they're gonna fax me something, I mean email me something. I'll draw 'em up something, yeah.

EH: Nice. Well I'll pack up my stuff.

JD: Well I'll take you out to lunch if you want me to now!

EH: Oh, well that's so nice of you. I should probably—I have to be in Huntington at 2:30, so I dunno—I might not have time. What's your favorite lunch spot?

JD: Oh I don't have any anymore. I don't have any!

EH: (laughs)

JD: I say, do I have to eat here again today?

EH: (laughs)

JD: It's true—somebody asked me the other day. I had my head...

30:03

END OF TAPE