

**James Day**

Where: JL Day Sign Company

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Date: March 13, 2018

Location: 3225 Georges Drive

Saint Albans, WV 25177

Interviewer: Emily Hilliard

Transcription: Emily Hilliard

Length: 1:00:38

**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.

This is Hilliard's second interview with Day, recorded for the West Virginia Folklife Program and West Virginia Public Broadcasting 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

CK: Chuck Kleine

00:00

**EH: So could you introduce yourself and tell me your name, your age, and where we are right now?**

JD: K. My name's James L. Day and I'm 85 years old and we're in... on Georges Drive in St. Albans, West Virginia.

**EH: What's the name of your business?**

JD: Day Sign Company, yes.

EH: Could you say, "we are at Day Sign Company?"

JD: Yes, we are at Day Sign Company. Yes.

**EH: How long have you been making signs and how did you learn?**

JD: Well I started out as a sign painter and then I switched over and nobody hardly does signs anymore-- painted signs, so everybody's going to vinyl so I switched over to doing more neon than painted. Then painting signs.

**EH: And where was this and who taught you?**

JD: I picked it up myself. Most of it, yes. I did work around good sign painters and some of them wasn't so good, but I picked up what I could. (laughs) I used to watch a fella letter windows, I thought he was the greatest thing in the world, but later on I found out he wasn't...wasn't so good.

**EH: He would just do freehand?**

JD: Yes, yes.

**EH: Before I think you told me there was a crazy fellow in Kentucky who you learned neon from...could you talk a little bit about that?**

JD: Crazy... well, okay! (laughs) He was the one that was from Kentucky-- worked with him in Cleveland at the Luster Light, Luster Light Sign Company and he'd get on an elevator and he'd scream and carry on and just--he'd just embarrass, well I guess he tried to embarrass everybody, but he was a little bit odd, yes. Like the rest of us.

**EH: And how did you learn from him, just by watching?**

JD: Just watching, yes--him and two others. Two other neon tube benders.

**EH: So you really just learned from watching?**

JD: Yes, uh-huh, hands on, I guess what you'd call it, yes.

**EH: Could you just rephrase that and say.... I mostly learned from watching.**

JD: Yeah, okay, yeah. I mostly learned from watching other... other people bend glass, yes, uh-huh.

**EH: Was there a certain appeal to neon for you?**

JD: Well, in a way, yes there was. Yeah, I kinda liked it, yes uh-huh.

**EH: And what did you like about it?**

JD: Well I liked the product after it turned out, the way it turned out, and actually bending it-- I liked it, yes uh-huh.

**EH: And what year would this have been when you started making neon signs?**

JD: Probably in the middle or late 60s.

**EH: Would you say that that was a neon boom?**

JD: Yes it was. Actually it was probably the end of the neon boom really, 'cause I think the boom was really in the 30s and the 40s and the 50s. And I think it started fading out then about that time.

**EH: And I don't think we quite got a full phrase of you saying what the appeal of neon was for you. So could you say, You know, I was attracted to neon, or I was drawn to it because...**

JD: Yeah, I did like the neon, I liked the neon, I liked the way it turned out, I liked to watch people bend it and the whole deal of it. The whole set up, yes uh-huh, and what you could do with the different colors and so forth, the different gases.

**EH: Could you tell me how you started this shop here?**

JD: Well I just started from we moved in here--this an old garage at one time, and we bought the house and the garage come with it and so I opened a shop up down here and did mostly painted signs then. Didn't do any neon. Then later on I bought a neon plant and started making glass. Making neon, yes.

**EH: When would that have been?**

JD: We moved here in 19... in '64.

4:59

And I think I was here before... before we bought the house, I think I was here before then, I think like 1960 and then we moved here in '64.

**EH: What are the changes that you've seen in the industry since you started in '64?**

JD: Well, mostly everything's going to vinyl, vinyl lettering, and the neon is going to LEDs, so it may come back, I don't know, I look for it to, in a way, for it to come back. And but most people are going with LED yes, instead of neon, yes.

**EH: How do you feel about that?**

JD: Well, I can't...it's alright. I use a lot of LEDs in the place of neon, yes.

**EH: Do you think there-- is there a change in maybe the creativity and the craft of it without neon?**

JD: There is. There is, yes. It's easier to work with--the LED is, and it's a little more economical to operate and you can do it quicker than you can, than you can do neon yes, uh-huh.

**EH: Why don't you tell us a bit about some of the signs that you've made, maybe some of the most unusual.**

6:16

JD: Well I don't know- most unusual, I don't know.

**EH: Or just a list-- I know you've done a lot of hot dog companies...**

JD: Yeah, I do a lot of Sam's Hot Dogs, I made a lot of neon signs for them and let's see like I've made, well, I can't think of any more neon signs that I made in production, I mean like the Sam's Hot Dogs. But...

**EH: So with Sam's you were doing the same sign after the same sign.**

JD: Same thing, yeah. Uh-huh, yeah.

**EH: And that scrapbook that I went through of all the pictures of the neon signs-- could you list some of those that are in there?**

JD: Yes, if I could remember 'em (laughs) Yeah there were some... some for Mister Craigo, the Tudors and Gino's, I've done several of those, yes, uh-huh, and other than that I can't... don't know what other kind of signs is in that.

**EH: Well how about I'll list them and you can repeat (laughs)**

JD: (laughs) Okay, okay.

**EH: Cause I remember-- there's the sign for the post office for stamps,**

JD: Right, that's right.

**EH: There's Taylor Books,**

JD: Taylor Books, yes.

**EH: There's some strip clubs...**

JD: That's right-- I've done several of them strip...

**EH: I don't know if you want to put that on public broadcasting.**

JD: Well doesn't matter to me. I have done some several strip clubs, I done one with a woman on it we put up at Parkersburg-- it had a neon lady on it. And I was gonna paint a picture of a naked lady over here on the church after he got his church built (laughs) and my wife said she wanted to pose for me. I said, well that'll be alright (laughs) but he didn't... he just laughed about it.

**EH: What else... churches?**

JD: Yes, I've done several churches, yes ma'am, a lot of them, yes.

8:32

**EH: Did you ever do a church sign and a strip club sign in the same day?**

JD: No! (laughs) Now, I don't know about that, I don't know about that. Some of them are done awful close together I do know that, yeah.

**EH: yeah, if you want to list-- I don't know if I spurred your memory, but if you want to list some of the signs-- the Giovanni's Pizza, Zippys, Chris'**

JD: Yeah, Chris'

**EH: MESH design, The Underground Cinema.**

JD: Right, uh-huh. I done the Alban theater down here and I done the Robie Theater at Spencer, I done that sign over again.

**EH: And with the Alban theater, these are sort of these decorative lines and...**

JD: With an A in the middle of it, yes.

**EH: Could you talk a little bit about-- well actually, let me take a step back. Why don't you walk us through what you were doing today, from when you wrote out the letters with a pencil to the finish.**

JD: I laid the letters out on the non-best that's in there, up where they would be face down, the letters were, in other words they'd be backward. And then I bent each letter separate and then welded them together and put 'em on the pump and pumped 'em, yes.

**EH: When you were blowing, when you put the hose into the glass letters, what were you doing?**

JD: I blowed it out to the original shape. It'll suck in on the, it'll collapse on you when it's, when you're putting it in the fire, it'll collapse. And just keep it blowed out to natural, natural size, yes, original size.

**EH: Why did you chose the letters R, O, A?**

JD: I just thought they could be good letters to show, to show how they were made, yes.

10:49

**EH: Can you rephrase that and say, "I chose ROA, because I thought they would show..." you know, maybe your style-- you were saying earlier that different people make Os differently?**

JD: Yeah, they do, they bend 'em different than the way I do but mine didn't work out right, so, but they do bend 'em different, yes, they are made different than... the R is a good letter to show how it's made and the A's not to bad either, but that's why I picked those, yes.

**EH: And why is that? It's like how it's bent?**

JD: And so forth, yes.

**EH: So even just hearing you say that, Oh I just bent the tubes and then I did this and then I did this, it seems so simple, but could you actually kind of break it down, because I don't fully understand what was happening as you were...**

JD: Well, first I'll start out with the R-- I make the round part of the R first. The round section of it and then I'll bring it over and I'll make the double back which goes into the, which goes goes over to the back side of the R-- I'll make a double back there and then I'll bend it over, bend the double back over to make the stroke of the R-- be the angled stroke and then the last stroke will be the side that, the side of the R, the right side of the R. And then on the O I made half of it, and I shoulda made the other half but it didn't come out that way. But anyhow, it shoulda come out the way it shoulda met each other, but it didn't. And the A, I made it with the double back first, double back, then I made the bottom leg, then I made the top

leg, made the bend over, bent it over so it would look like an A and then I put an electrode on one end and made the, bent the other end so it would match the O when I put it together.

**EH: And how do you fuse the letters together?**

JD: Weld 'em together in... on the crossfires.

**EH: And do you know how hot the...**

JD: No, not really, I think 800 some degrees I believe, but not... I'm not sure about that. I'm not exactly sure.

13:25

**EH: Okay, so once you have all the letters together, then what's the next step?**

JD: Next step--it'd be called a unit then, I'd take it over and put it on the manifold, hook it up to the manifold and pump into it with the vacuum. When it, when it's in a vacuum, it should light up, and after it lights up, it'll burn the impurities out of it. And after it cools it'll be--that means it's sterile and it's ready to gas after it cools off, yes, and I'll seal it off from the manifold then, with either neon or argon. And the argon, I put mercury in with it.

**EH: And why do you do that?**

JD: Well, it has to have mercury for it to burn right-- the argon does.

**EH: And could you explain... so you had 3 different colors of gas, or...3 different colors of glass, and how the gas affects those--the argon versus the neon and makes those different colors.**

JD: Okay-- the... if I pumped it with the red, the first letter, the R would be red-- it was clear glass. The O is yellow--it would have been orange with the red-- with the neon in it, and the A is blue which would have made it pink with the argon--with the neon in it. And then the other way, with the argon in it, the first--the R, the clear R would have been blue, the O woulda been yella, and the last A--the A woulda been blue with the argon in it.

**EH: What would you say are the hazards of the job.**

WVPB: Ask him about the oval.

**EH: Oh yeah, okay--the oval. The oval that you...**

JD: Yeah, that I gassed?

**EH: Yeah. Could you tell us about that because we'll probably have that footage.**



JD: Well I did... it was a repair, I did -- I put electrodes on and pumped it on the manifold and bombarded it in gas, yes, uh-huh.

**EH: And that was clear glass with...**

JD: No, that was clear green glass with argon in it. And if it had been pumped with neon, it woulda been orange. With the green glass, yes.

**EH: And what was that repair for?**

JD: I don't know-- I think it was for a fella in Pitts-- in Parkersburg. Now I do do a lot of work for this Advance Auto, which is a lot of green glass pumped with neon.

**EH: So what color does that result in?**

JD: Orange.

**EH: Do you worry about using mercury?**

JD: Not really, no. I don't. (laughs) No, I really don't uh-uh.

**EH: What would you say are the other hazards of your job?**

JD: Well I always plan on getting burned or getting cut-- one or the other. Or both. Either one-- so that's what-- usually burning is the worse.

**EH: And you said you didn't know how hot the torch is?**

JD: No, I really don't know but if you touch the glass it's hot, I do know that.

**EH: How often would you say you cut or burn yourself?**

JD: Oh, I don't know-- not too much anymore, maybe once a month or so.

**EH: Let's see...**

**WVPB: I wanna know more about the process. So you put it on the manifold and then um... you had that set of red lights?**

JD: That's to show me that the bombardier is on.

**WVPB: Ok, if you would-- explain-- cause you also, you sat down for a second and you kicked something and it triggered...**

JD: That was...

**WVPB: So if you would--tell her, tell her what that process was--that was very interesting.**

JD: Okay. Okay. The red light's just to tell me that the bombardier is on--I don't want to get ahold of it. And when I-- I just use my foot to kick that switch on which turns the bombardier on. That's what regulates the amount of heat that goes into the tubes and then after, after I burn it in and it's sterilized it'll cool off and then after it's... after it gassed, after it's... the impurities are burned out of it, I'll gas it then, after it cools off--yes.

**EH: And could you explain the manifold, because I don't...**

JD: Well the manifold, it's... it is set up so you can get a complete vacuum--it's not a complete vacuum but it's close to a complete vacuum that you can put-- that you can get in the tube. They need to be almost in a complete vacuum if you can... if you can get 'em in that.

18:43

You know, in that way. But that's the only way you can get 'em to burn in--burn the impurities out of it.

**EH: And so there's all these different tubes on the manifold--what do they all do?**

JD: Some of 'em are gauges, and other ones are just valves--yes, uh-huh.

**EH: Can you just rephrase that and say... "the different tubes on the manifold..."**

JD: The different tubes on the manifold-- most of 'em are valves and they are--there's on gas pressure gauge, yes. And it depends on the size of the gas--size of the tubing, how much gas I put in 'em. The more, the bigger the glass, the more footage I can get on a transformer with the... the bigger the glass is, the more footage I can get. The smaller it is, it has less resistance, then it has more resistance, yes.

**EH: You seem to be able to just do everything by, you know, by feel, and you can tell how much you need. When you were first starting, was this different? Did you have to measure--did you have to like, constantly be testing how you were bending the tubes?**

JD: No, not really, I just... you mean when I first started, started learning this? Yeah.

**EH: Like you've been doing it for so long, it seems you can really do it by... you just know because you...**

JD: Just experience, a lot of experience I guess is what you'd... only think I could say.

**EH: But if someone was just starting out-- like if you were teaching them to make neon signs, would they be able to do that in the same way?**

JD: Well eventually they would, yes. Most of 'em would, yes, uh-huh, if they had enough time.

**EH: But right away...**

JD: No.

**EH: Yeah, what I'm asking is-- if someone was less experienced, would they have to be constantly measuring to bend the tubes correctly, make sure they were putting in enough gas...**

JD: I would think--yes, oh yes, uh-huh.

21:00

**EH: Um... okay... let's see. Could you tell me where you source your equipment from-- like gas, and where you've gotten your equipment? The gas, the glass, manifolds...**

JD: The glass- the glass I buy most of it from Cincinnati Sign Supply. The neon, I mean the neon and argon gas-- I'll buy it at a sign supply place too. And most of my, most of my equipment was bought, was bought 2nd hand at different places. Maybe some of it was bought at auctions and some I did buy new, yes.

**EH: Is that equipment readily available?**

JD: It is now, yes, uh-huh, yes.

**EH: So if someone were just starting up a shop, it wouldn't be too hard to find?**

JD: No, you can buy it, no you buy it. And I bought the gauge separate off the outfit that sells that, that gauge. The one that-- the manifold gauge is the one I'm talking about, yeah.

**EH: Before you were telling me a little bit about where all the glass came from and you said there was some special...**

JD: There is some special gas, yes. Some of it comes from France--it's called Technolux, and that's a colored-- usually colored glass.

**EH: And what makes it special?**

JD: It's-- the way it's made and the color it is-- the color is made right in it.

**EH: And it's usually a pretty vibrant color?**

JD: Yes it is, uh-huh, yes. It's expensive glass.

**EH: I guess I sort of asked this-- have you seen, you know, not just a change in industry, but what have your clients asked for over the years and has that changed?**

JD: Yes-- yeah, yes... I can't... I don't know how to explain. I don't know how to explain it. It has changed, yeah, we're... people maybe buy-- talk about neon signs, they may buy one for their man cave or maybe to just put on their wall w their names on it or whatever. But it has changed yes, uh-huh.

**EH: So it's more personal?**

JD: Yeah, more personal, yes, unless they are in business and then they pretty much know what they want.

**EH: Could you describe your typical day on the job?**

JD: I try to get down here early so I can do pretty good business and bend glass and sometimes a day will go just fine--other times it won't. Other times, it goes terrible. And uh... but some days I come down here and it works just fine and if there's nobody around, usually it's the best. Like on a... like on a Sunday or something.

**EH: So you're telling us to get out?**

JD: No (laughs)

**EH: What makes it go bad?**

JD: You mean the neon? Well if it's exposed to a lot of bad weather or somebody throws something against it and breaks it or the transformer goes bad or if it's not gassed right, it'll go bad, yes. Uh-huh.

**EH: Do you think of yourself as an artist?**

JD: I do yes, uh-huh.

**EH: What-- do you have signs and work that you're most proud of?**

JD: yes, I do, yes, uh-huh.

**EH: Could you talk about what that is? (laughs)**

JD: Well, (laughs) Well, I dunno maybe we can go back to some of them same ones. Some of 'em that, some of the Sam's Hot Dogs, I kinda like some of those, and the Gino's and the Tudors-- I kinda like some of that, and...anything that's out there. Giovanni's and so forth. And I like the--doing the neon like the Giovanni man outta neon-- I've done several of them. I like that, yes.

**EH: And why those in particular?**

JD: Well, they're just interesting I think and they're interesting to make.

**EH: They're all multiple colors right?**

JD: Well, some of 'em are. Some of 'em are just one color--usually red. Yes.

**EH: And then I know you made one for your family reunion-- could you talk a little bit about that one?**

JD: Well, I've made 2... I've made 2 or 3 of 'em. I made one that-- one before this one had Day Family Reunion on it. Then this one has the 17 on it with the 17 kids on the back. But I made some for me-- I made one of Hillary's logo-- Hillary Clinton? Her logo. And I gave it to one of my sisters and I made their names, I made one for my wife for her kitchen, and I made one for my brother, my sister and her husband a month or so ago.

**EH: What does that one say?**

JD: Jerry and Debbie. And the one-- you know what Hillary's logo looked like didn't ya? Well I made one of them, yes.

**EH: So that's the H with the arrow?**

JD: The H with the arrow yes.

**EH: And different colors?**

JD: I made it with blue and white. Yes.

**EH: What was the one for your wife's kitchen?**

JD: It says "Barb's Kitchen" on it and it's made out of pink. Pink neon, which is blue pumped with neon, with neon, yes.

**EH: And is it hanging in your house?**

JD: It's up above the kitchen sink. Yes, mmhm.

**EH: Any other like pet or personal projects--personal sign projects that you want to talk about?**

JD: No, I'm about, well no, not right offhand I can't think of any. Not right off hand I can't, no.

**EH: What's kept you doing it?**

JD: Just, I enjoy workin! And enjoy doing this and you know, I'm not, don't have too much pressure or anything.

**EH: Do you listen to anything when you're working?**

JD: Sometimes I do, sometimes I listen to the radio, yes, uh-huh. I do.

**EH: What do you listen to?**

JD: Whatever, whatever I can. Music usually. Usually country music if I listen to anything, yes.

**EH: Are there any good country songs about neon signs?**

JD: Well, there are several that does, yeah, do mention neon signs in 'em--yeah. I don't know exactly what they are but there is some. Yes, uh-huh.

**EH: How long does it take for you to make a sign, say just a one-word sign, start to finish?**

JD: Probably-- I could usually make 'em in a couple hours, counting making 'em and putting 'em together and gassing 'em and blacking 'em out.

**EH: And how long would that last, you know, if someone put it up just on their building--how long would that neon sign last?**

JD: Well, it's hard to say. I've had 'em, brought 'em in here before when they were 75 years old and older than that. Ford signs, I done a Ford sign for a fella over in Spencer and he brought 'em in here and there were two units still burning-- I don't know how old the sign was but... then a guy brought a Budweiser sign in that according to the transformer was 75 years old. Still burning, yes.

**EH: And what keeps it-- what would account for how long it lasts?**

JD: Just done right, I guess. Just done right and had a good transformer on it and...

**EH: Let's see... do you... are you part of a community of neon sign makers?**

JD: No, not really, no.

30:37

Uh-uh no. when I go over to the museum I might be. (laughs) When I go over there maybe.

**EH: Who else is doing it in this area?**

JD: Nobody that I know of. No ma'am. No.

**EH: Can you put that-- you know, just rephrase it and say, "I think I am the only person..."**

JD: I think I am the only person around here that is doing this. I ship, I send neon out quite a few different places in Ohio, in Kentucky, in Virginia, yes.

**EH: Is there anyone at least across the country, that you might consider a colleague or call if you had questions?**

JD: Yes, there is, uh-huh, yep.

**EH: And you were talking about--well I know you mentioned there is a neon sign museum in Las Vegas?**

JD: Yes, uh-huh.

**EH: Can you talk a little bit about your trip to the Cincinnati Sign Museum and why it was so interesting?**

JD: Well it had different signs, it had Holiday Inns in it, it had Fresia's Big Boy, it had the Old McDonald signs, it had tobacco barns with the old Mail Pouch painted on them-- it had two of those. And had a lot of odds and ends. Had several clocks--they made a lot of clocks in Lima, OH with neon in 'em--they had a lot of those. They had a lot of just odd signs--went clear back to the 1900s.

**EH: When you see a sign that someone else has made, do you size it up?**

JD: Sometimes, I've seen some real nice ones, yes, uh-huh. If I do, I take a picture of it and steal their idea (laughs).

**EH: And that would just be how they bend certain things?**

JD: Well no, no--usually the colors! Yeah, I took a picture of one down in Nashville one time-- it was eye catching. Yeah, and it was made out of blue, I think, and green, which it was outstanding to me.

**EH: Do you guys have questions?**

**WVPB: What's your favorite sign you've ever made?**

JD: Oh, God. (laughs)

**WVPB: Alright, what's the hardest sign you ever made?**

33:02

JD: (laughs)

**WVPB: What's the easiest sign you ever made?**

JD: (laughs) None of 'em are real easy! Some of 'em are easier than the other ones. The straight neon, I can-- it's the easiest to make, like if you was gonna strip a building with straight neon? It's easy to make-- I can make a lot of it. But anything that's got a lot of complicated letters in it like spurred letters and so forth, is kinda hard to work with.

**WVPB: Are you sad to see this art kind of being pushed to the wayside?**

**EH: Are you sad to see this art...?**

JD: Yes, I am, I am, yeah.

**EH: Can you talk a little bit about that?**

JD: Well I believe eventually neon will come back, I think it will come back. I think it has in different places. I think they use a lot of it in different parts of the country. Course Vegas is, Las Vegas is big on neon--they always have been.

**EH: Have you ever taught anyone how to do it?**

JD: No, no.

**EH: Would you have advice for, you know, say a young person wants to be part of the neon revival--what would you say to them?**

JD: I'd say, well just come in and learn how to do it and eventually, eventually you'll be able to bend glass, yeah, and make neon, yeah. If you got enough time.

**Chuck: Did you explain what it is? I mean, bent glass filled with gas,**

**EH: Yeah, that's a good question. So say that there was a Martian that just appeared in your shop and you were trying to explain what neon signs are to them, how would you do it?**

JD: (laughs) Well, I don't... I guess what it is it's a piece of glass that's bent the way you want it to bend, and there's an electrode on each end of it and filled with gas, and when it's hooked up to a transformer it'll light up. And other than that that's about...

**EH: And if I was a Martian I would say, "why do you want a sign to light up?"**

JD: (laughs) I don't know.

**EH: Well, maybe I'll ask it another way-- how do you feel seeing your signs? I mean you have signs all over the state, all over the region, how does it feel to drive by in the night and see all of your signs?**



JD: I mean-- it feels, I like seeing 'em, yes I do. Yeah, uh-huh. Some of 'em yes I do. I like to see him. Yes.

**EH: Are there any you check up on to make sure they're still...**

JD: no, not really! (laughs) If they need... if people, if they go out, usually they'll call me and I'll go check 'em out then. But I don't go around soliciting, no.

**Chuck: What is it that took you from painting to neon?**

JD: Well people don't-- vinyl took over all the lettering, the sign painting, so people don't want a painted sign any more. They'll go with vinyl which is a whole lot cheaper, quicker. So I got away from it and got into neon. That way.

**Chuck: Sure, but is there a particular quality to the sign as opposed to... neon sign, whether it's vinyl, or painted, or anything. It's a neon sign!**

JD: Well it's just more attractive than any other kind of sign. A neon sign is.

**Chuck: Do you have any special, personal thoughts on it? I guess that's what I'm trying to get... do you love it? Do you love neon signs yourself personally?**

JD: I do like 'em yes, uh-huh. Yeah, and everybody comes in and I say, if you don't like a neon sign, there's something wrong with ya, and they'll say, yeah, that's right! Everybody likes neon.

**EH: Why do you think?**

JD: I don't know why.

**WVPB: Would they call it an argon sign if it was argon gas? Why are they called neon signs and not argon signs?**

JD: I don't know! (laughs) Well neon was the first one to come out with I guess, yeah. From what I understand, they made... in 1906 it was a Packard sign in Los-- in California somewhere in 19-6 is supposed to have been the first neon sign. And the red, the neon of course is the red which is the most popular, yes. That's why I guess they call it neon, yes. But if you hear it in a song, it's not argon. It's always neon.

**EH: I just want to maybe dig a little bit further-- so why do people sing about neon signs instead of vinyl signs? What is...**

JD: Well, it's just not the same thing. One is a lighted sign, and one of 'em is just an artificial painted sign?

**EH: IS there a moment when you were a kid you remember seeing neon signs, maybe going downtown...**

JD: I never paid much attention to 'em I was interested in painted signs then. In.... and I don't know if I ever paid much attention to neon then. But... like I do now, yes.

39:13

**WVPB: So I wanna get down to the process again.**

**EH: Yeah.**

**WVPB: I'm gonna stand over here just so you're looking at me.**

JD: Okay.

**WVPB: So getting back-- so the first thing you did was cut out the letters. You made the shape...**

JD: Yeah, that's right.

**WVPB: And then you bent the letters. What were you doing with the cork?**

JD: I was... I had one end corked off, I had one end corked off so when I blow into it it'll... it's closed off, that end, you know, so I could blow into it. That's why I cork it off. And that way the heat doesn't travel either... if you get it corked off. If you didn't have it corked off, it would travel through the glass.

**WVPB: So then you blow into it because the glass is starting to...**

JD: Collapse, collapse, yes uh-huh. Blow it, try to blow it back to the original shape.

**WVPB: Is it possible to blow it too big?**

JD: Oh yes, uh-huh. Yes.

**WVPB: So how long did it take you to learn how long to blow that glass?**

JD: Oh I don't know maybe -- boy I don't know, probably a long time, maybe 5, 6 years I'd guess. But maybe longer!

**WVPB: Okay, so once you've got it in the shape, you fuse it together to the next letter?**

JD: Right, right.

**WVPB: And then you brought it over to get the impurities out of it.**

JD: Right, to the manifold. To the manifold, yes.

**WVPB: So if you could, walk me through that process one more time.**

JD: Okay. The manifold is designed so I could hook that tube up to the manifold and the manifold is made so I can pump it into, pump it in a vacuum and burn the impurities out of the tube--that's what it's hooked up for. And then when it's, when it's sterilized and all the impurities are burnt out of it, it's ready to gas.

**WVPB: What happens if there are impurities?**

JD: It won't light up, it won't light up. And if there's a leak in it, it won't light.

**WVPB: So can you tell me again--if there's impurities in it... it just won't...**

JD: No, it won't light up. It won't burn right. Well, it might burn, but it'll burn out eventually, yes.

**WVPB: And then the transformer-- is that a DC/AC...?**

JD: It's a... well, it's a-- the transformers we use, most of 'em anymore are electronic, but they still--they work on either the voltage depends on what size--how much tubing you've got on it. They'll work anymore from 3,000 volts to 15,000--the transformers are. But it works off of 110 volt. And it's a secondary voltage is what it's called on a transformer. Either 30 milliamp or 60 milleamp. The higher the milleamp, the brighter the tubes.

**WVPB: Does that gas burn out or it just lights up?**

JD: the gas...

**WVPB: Once you hit it with the voltage, as long as there's no leak in there...**

JD: It's light up.

**WVPB: It'll always...**

JD: Yes. Long as your transformer's good. Yes, uh-huh.

**WVPB: So you get the impurities out, and then that's when you pump in whatever gas.**

JD: Right, yes, uh-huh.

**WVPB: Could you tell me a little bit about the process? I saw you-- like you took um... you took something and you're tapping or you're going around the glass and it was like arcing. What was that process about?**

JD: Oh that was, I used my tester--that was a test coil, it tells me if it's got any leaks in it or anything. Kay?

**WVPB: So when it arced-- was that a leak?**

JD: If it shows up, if it shows a light when it shows the light yes, it's got a leak in it. Yes. Uh-huh, yeah. But when I go around it with that tester it's showing me that it is in a vacuum and burning.

**WVPB: And then I guess the last thing-- so when you pump the gas in, how do you know the gas in there? How do...**

JD: I got a gauge, the gauge I go by, and I'll put so many millimeters of gas in a tube-- depends on how big the tube is.

**WVPB: Alright, so that's all scientific.**

JD: Well, yes.

**WVPB: it's not by feel.**

JD: No it isn't, no.

**WVPB: Okay, cause I thought you were just like meeeehhh....**

JD: No. (laughs) Well, some of it is. I try to feel how much gas to put in 'em, yeah.

**WVPB: Have you ever overfilled?**

JD: Oh yes I do and then I just re-do it over again. You put too much gas in, it's not as good as having not enough in it. So I just start over again. I'll just drain what's in there out and just start over again-- bombard the tube again. And get the right amount in.

**WVPB: How 'bout when you mount the signs-- do you also do the backgrounds?**

JD: Uh-huh, yes uh-huh.

44:42

**WVPB: You do all that here?**

JD: Uh-huh, yes, uh-huh. We can paint behind the letters, we can paint behind the neon, a lot of that we do. We usually paint the same color as the neon on the sign itself. And then that lets the glass show up better.

**WVPB: Okay.**

**EH: I know you answered this already, but are all neon signs handmade?**

JD: No, I think they got a production where they're making 'em now.

**EH: But before, mostly they were all...**

JD: They were handmade, yes, uh-huh. Yeah.

**EH: And I know you said something like the good ones are handmade.**

JD: They are, yes, the good ones are handmade, yes. Uh-huh.

**EH: Cause I think that's important to... well I think that's something that people don't realize, that you know, even when you see like a Bud Light neon sign that you see all the time at a bar-- it's often handmade.**

JD: Oh yes, they are, yeah probably, yeah a lot of 'em are production made, though, anymore. Yeah. Coca-Cola signs are good--they're all, they're all handmade, they're good. Or most of 'em were--they may not be now but they always were good. Yeah.

**EH: Are there any others that you keep an eye out for that you know that are old or well-made?**

JD: Not really no, no, not really.

**EH: Okay..**

JD: Made this one at Las Vegas, made one of those for one of my daughter's friends--they used it one night and then we took it down and they brought it back to me. I made it for them for nothing for that show that they had. But I did-- I sold it to-- a fella come in and bought it though. This is the second one I built.

**WVPB: And the Route 66?**

JD: Yeah, I just took it off of a calendar I had with that 66 on it. Yeah.

**WVPB: So how many a day or how many a year do you do?**

JD: Oh golly, I don't know. Counting repairs and everything-- I don't know. Sometimes I might do 5 or 6 repairs in a day. Sometimes I might just do 1 maybe, so I don't know, it just depends.

**EH: How many do you think you've made in your lifetime?**

JD: I don't know--more than 10! (laughs) I don't know--more than 100. I don't know how many but there's a lot of 'em. Yeah, I've done a lot of them, yeah.

**EH: And for you you said you consider yourself an artists--where do you... where's the creativity for you?**

JD: Well I don't think anybody, just anybody could pick up a glass and bend it, you know. I think you got to have a little bit of experience that way, yeah. And I do my own designing if I'm gonna design one, I do my own designing that way, yes.

**EH: Were you artistic as a kid? Did you draw?**

JD: Yes, I was. My whole family was. Most of 'em, most of 'em were, yeah.

**EH: I had one more... hmm... Is there anything else you would like to add?**

JD: Not that I know of! (laughs)

**EH: (laughs) We've worn you out.**

JD: No, I just... no... no...

49:02

**EH: Anyone else?**

**WVPB: So there's no one around here? You're the only one?**

JD: Well as far as I know I'm the only one around here.

**WVPB: How bout in the state?**

JD: No, there's more in the state. Yeah, there's... you from up around Morgantown?

**WVPB: Would you tell Emily?**

JD: Yeah, up around Morgantown, or...Clarksburg, there's City Neon--they do neon. I don't know whether they work in around Morgantown--I think they do, though. And then there's a Frank Boyd in Buckhannon--yeah, there's several places that do, that still do neon. I know City Neon does, or they always did a lot of neon work. They're out of Clarksburg.

**EH: I remember what I was gonna ask. If I am around and I see a neon sign is there--do you have a signature? Something that would show me, oh this is a Jim Day sign.**

JD: Well, I've got some little labels I think on some of 'em, yeah. (laughs) Some of 'em... but some of 'em, the bigger signs I haven't put my name on the bottom of them. Yes. They're on 'em somewhere.

**EH: There isn't sort of a special way that you bend the letters that is unique?**

JD: Not really, they're mostly standard, yeah.

**EH: Okay.**

**WVPB: Okay, and we got your name?**

**EH: Maybe let's do that again?**

**WVPB: Yeah, could you give us like the laundry list of the best you can remember, name like stuff in and around Charleston--you know just a laundry list of the signs you've made, neon signs you've made-- try to get that nailed down. And it doesn't have to be perfect-- you could lie too. (laughs)**

JD: Well I could if I had my magazine or... can I get that magazine?

**EH: Yeah, I'll get it.**

JD: Ask me sometimes what my name is, I can't even remember!

**WVPB: Is that the neon or the argon talking?**

JD: Right, yeah. Here's a-- let's see what we got here, Sam's Hot Dogs, I've done several of them and here's a 5 star gentlemen's club that don't have a naked woman on it and Fazio's...I've done Fazio's, here's a McDonald's, this funeral home, here's the sign for a lawyer in Winfield, here's a Spotted Hen which is a channel letter sign.

**WVPB: Can we see some of those? When you flip 'em can we...just let me see the picture.**

JD: Here's a Giovanni's, this is in Logan. Another Giovanni's. This is this Route 66 sign back here. The Alban Theatre, the Alban Theatre, which is got nothing outstanding. And Yeager Insurance, Rock Branch Community Church, some of these are plastic signs, not lighted signs. Here's a Stone and Thomas, Stone and Thomas, here's a Raymond City Church of Christ... Dairy Queen, Dairy Queen, another Alban Theater, here's a JB's Gentleman's Club, Sierra Tanning... what that is...

53:15

**WVPB: What would a sign run me?**

JD: Depends on what all you want on it, how you've, you talking about neon now or...

**WVPB: Yeah!**

JD: Depends on how many letters you want, how big they are, what you want it mounted on and there's the... Vegas sign, here's the one for the post office. Here's...

**WVPB: What's the ballpark price?**

JD: Well, you could get something, like if you want one for your man cave or something, you could probably get one for 2 or 300 dollars, 4, depends on what all you want on it. I gave a lady a price last week of \$160 and she said that's the highest thing she ever heard of! I thought I was giving her a break!

**WVPB: Yeah, right!**

JD: I was giving her a break--there's the one at the airport for Tudors and Gino's, and I also told you I did one at Huntington, didn't I? Yeah, Huntington--theatre, I mean, airport down there. Suzi's, Suzi's Hamburgers here in South Charleston-- he's a hunting buddy of mine.

**EH: Was that Hard Rock Cafe for the same Suzi?**

55:01

JD: That's a different--that was his daughter, had one over on 7th avenue over in Charleston. Here's the Hibachi I done for... out at Corridor G. Here's one I done for my sister's niece. Was their wedding, wedding present. I believe it was. A couple of them OPEN signs--I've made several of them. Another theater. Here's a Dairy Bar...

**WVPB: Does this bring back any memories?**

JD: Yeah, a lot of 'em do.

56:30

Yeah, real do-- some of 'em are bad memories and some of 'em are not too bad. I try to make friends wherever I--if I do something for somebody, I have made some friends over the years. And I don't try to make any enemies... sometimes you can't keep it... keep from it. But I dunno, a lot of people I work for, I think they are my friends. They... seems to be anyhow. Or at least that's...

**EH: So could you introduce yourself for the camera--your name, your age, what you do and the name of your business?**

JD: K. Name's James Day, James L Day and I operate Day Sign Company in St. Albans, West Virginia. I'm 85 years old I still work every day if I can-- sometimes I don't make it all day! (laughs) But most of the times I make it 'til noon anyhow! (laughs) But... that's about it.



**EH: I wondered 'cause when I asked you about your day you just said, I eat breakfast, I get down here early, and then it might go well or it might go...**

JD: It's...sometimes it does...sometimes if I'm not under any pressure, seems like I can do just fine. And other days I just, I dunno, something. I dunno what it is--there's something there.

EH: you think you'll ever retire?

JD: I dunno I'll have to probably some day. (laughs) I'm not planning on doing it today, but I may have to sometime soon, yes, uh-huh.

EH: Do you think there's any specific process part we should go over again?

WVPB: I mean, not that I can think of. I mean I can almost see that as a musical montage kinda thing as well, but... So what does your wife think about this whole thing?

JD: She's-- I lost my wife a year ago.

WVPB: Oh, okay.

JD: She always liked... she always, she never took a big interest in it but she always liked it. She always liked signs as far as I could tell, but-- and she liked the money from 'em. I know that! (laughs)

CK: You didn't light your whole house with neon signs or anything like that?

JD: No, I just have one in the kitchen. And... most of 'em I just make and give away to me... to most of my people.

EH: What'd she think of that sign you made for her?

JD: She liked it, yeah, it's been up for I don't know 25 or 30 years. She always liked it, I guess, as far as I know she did. But she didn't have much choice because when you turn the kitchen light on it comes on. (laughs)

EH: So she would wash dishes under it?

JD: Uh-huh, yes, Uh-huh.

EH: Well, I think we're good!

59:49

Yeah, I think we wore you out!

JD: You didn't pick much of a brain to pick mine! (laughs)

EH: Well thank you so much!

JD: Well...thanks for coming in and putting up with me.

EH: Thanks for all the signs around Charleston.

JD: Well okay.

CK: Mr. Roberts is gonna go through Charleston get the signs?

EH: Yeah, so as part of this, someone's gonna go through and film a bunch of your signs at night.

JD: Oh, okay, yeah. Yeah I'm good, ok, sure.

CK: So you don't think we need those photographs?

EH: Well, I took photos of all... of many of them before you guys came, so I'll send them.

1:00:38

END OF TAPE