

AUDIO INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

Jones, Marion: transcript of an audio interview (10-May-2000)

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Jones, Marion: transcript of an audio interview (10-May-2000)*

Biography: Mrs Marion Jones was a field worker at the Epidemiology Research Unit from 1967 to 1997.

AN: Andy Ness

MJ: Marion Jones

JH: Janie Hughes [also present]

AN: Now if I could start the interview by just asking you a little bit, if you could tell me when and where you were born, and then tell me a little bit about your early life growing up.

MJ: I was born in Kingston in Surrey as you can tell by my accent! My father was working there at the time, but I am from pure Welsh stock. War broke out and we came back to Wales and first of all we came to Abercynon and I lived there for about one year, because we went back to London again and then when the bombing got too bad, then we came back here again. So I came to Wales for the second time when I was about three and then we came to Maerdy and this is where I have been ever since.

AN: What did your father do?

MJ: My father was a miner originally, and during the depression he went up to London, that was the 1926 strike, and then my mother went up for a holiday, because they had been courting for many years, and they got married up there, and then my mother came back here to look after my grandmother and then she went back up again to London and I was born up there. But my father was a bus driver then, when he came back originally, and he was on the buses for about 19 or 20 years, and he had a heart attack and died, so it was very sudden, and that was in 1962. I got married in 1960 and my daughter was born in 1963 and she was married in 1985. She has been married 15 years, they haven't any children.

AN: Can I just go back, do you have brothers and sisters?

MJ: No, no brothers or sisters. My mother is the youngest of 11 children and my father was one of 8.

AN: Did they decide just to stop at one?

MJ: No it was just circumstances. My mother was 30 when she had me, and of course she was looking after my grandmother when I was very small, and after my grandmother died, she wanted more children, but none came along. And the same thing happened with me actually. I had Christine and I didn't have any more, but I would have liked another one.

AN: And then you went to school presumably here in Maerdy?

* Interview conducted by Dr Andy Ness, for the History of Twentieth Century Medicine Research Group, UCL, 10 May 2000. Transcribed by Mrs Jacqui Carter, and edited by Professor Tilli Tansey and Dr Hugh Thomas.

MJ: Yes, and then I went to the grammar school and after grammar school I went to technical college for a year, and then I started work in a bank.

AN: What did you do at the technical college?

MJ: Shorthand and typing, a clerical course, but I was lucky and I had a job in a bank and I worked there for nearly six years. I got married while I was in the bank and I left then to have Christine, my daughter, so I didn't go back to work then until she had started school, and then I saw this advert and applied for this job, because it was local, it was in the Rhondda, and I started then with the MRC and that was 1967. So it was only for six months. Now thirty years later. . .

AN: And what did you start doing? What was the first thing you did?

MJ: Oh it was a dietary study. Dr Elwood was interested in anaemia and he was screening all the women in the Rhondda and part of that was to see about the women's diets and I just went around then, they were weighing their food for me, you know just a selected few. I never liked dietary work.

AN: Why not?

MJ: I don't like asking people to do things for me, it's just one of those things, but you get used to it over the years.

AN: So what did you move on to after that?

MJ: I really can't remember. I think I went down to Cardiff then, because I was based here you see, I can't remember what else I did. Oh I was doing home visiting with Tom then, Tom Benjamin.

AN: So this would be the follow-up of the Rhondda thing?

MJ: Yes, he wanted someone to help with the home visiting and I was roped in. We did that for quite a few years then.

AN: What was an average day at work like? What did you do, when did you start, how long for, what sort of jobs, what was it like, were no two days the same?

MJ: You just went around houses, persuading people to come to clinics. We would meet in the morning, whenever, Tom, quite a few others, I can't remember now, Keith Thomas, Norris Bartlett, and then we would go our separate ways and just book clinics then and sometimes I would be in a clinic at the desk and I liked that.

AN: Rather than the visiting?

MJ: Yes.

AN: What sort of time would you be starting in the morning and how long would your day go on for?

MJ: Well we would start about between 9 and 10. We would meet up, have coffee, and we didn't like to knock on doors before 10 o'clock really and then we would break for lunch, and I would usually be home by half past four, five.

AN: Did you have to do evening visiting and weekends and so on?

MJ: Yes, yes. It was very flexible for me, because my daughter was small you see and so it suited me alright.

AN: And in terms of visiting, would you be going by car, or was it just walking around?

MJ: Oh it was walking around, I didn't drive at the time, and all the others drove and they dropped me and I would do a street myself, it was mostly walking.

AN: And what was it like, my impression is that doing fieldwork has changed, that these days you would write to people and you would have consent forms and all this sort of thing.

MJ: Oh it was nothing like that then, nothing at all. You just knocked on the door and everyone would say 'come in', and you would just make an appointment and have a chat and go to the next one. And then these random samples came in then and everything had to be done randomly, so that did make life a little harder I thought. Whereas you were going through the street to see all the women, now you had the random sample of ages and you had to find out their age first, and you would ask that on the doorstep.

AN: And then if they were the right age you would ask if you could interview them?

MJ: Yes.

AN: Did people ever refuse?

MJ: Oh yes, yes. Some couldn't be bothered. The trouble was I think that once they came, they were committed, and there was always something else they wanted from them you see, and it snowballed, that was the thing. So we used to have to get round them, and they would be reluctant some of them.

AN: And the early studies I think were done very much on miners and respiratory disease, so that reading around it one gets the feeling that the unions and the miners themselves were very committed to supporting the research. Was there a feeling that the community felt involved?

MJ: Yes, that was in the fifties, and my father was one of the ones that attended the mass X-ray that Professor Cochrane was conducting at the time.

AN: That was the two valleys study was it?

MJ: Yes. And they discovered a tumour growing around my father's heart, and he was 44 I think, and he went into Llandough hospital for tests and then he was admitted to Sully hospital and he had a big heart operation then, in 1951. Apparently, Fred (Moore) told me, that what it was he was one of a twin that never developed and part of the other heart was sort of rubbing around his heart. I don't know, because Fred and Professor Cochrane came to this house in the fifties you see. And the strange thing was that after my father had the operation and he recovered, Professor Cochrane offered him a job driving the X-ray unit, but that meant going further afield you see, so my father didn't want that, so he stuck to the buses.

AN: And how did your father feel about being part of the studies?

MJ: Oh everyone was, they would do anything you know at that time, and the whole community were X-rayed, the whole family you see.

AN: Do you think that feeling of being involved and committed changed over the time?

MJ: Oh yes, yes. Everything has changed. It's a different league now altogether.

AN: Why do you think that has changed, what has caused it to be less?

MJ: Oh people have less time now, I mean my mother never went out to work, her work was here, in the house, and you know women go out to work now just for financial reasons I should think more than social reasons.

AN: When you were first working at the Unit, who was your supervisor or boss?

MJ: Oh Dr Elwood. He was the one that interviewed me for the job. But he was the one that I answered to.

AN: You had some dealings you say with Fred Moore and Professor Cochrane.

MJ: Oh yes, they were in the Unit.

AN: Because Professor Cochrane would still have been director in 1967.

MJ: Yes, but Dr Elwood was the one that I answered to.

AN: I am just interested in, when you started doing the work, were you trained on the job or were there training packages?

MJ: I was anything they were short of, whatever you are short of, ask Marion. The only time we had formal training was when [we] went up to London to St Thomas' Hospital to be trained in the use of callipers there. How to measure children properly, skin thickness.

AN: This is when you did the school milk studies.

MJ: Yes.

AN: That would be in the mid-seventies, late-seventies?

MJ: Yes.

AN: So you worked initially on anaemia work and diets, and then did some work on the Rhondda studies. What other projects would you have worked on before the milk study?

JH: Vale of Glamorgan, you did a lot of dust, registrar's department.

MJ: Oh yes, and the mortality studies, we used to do an awful lot of that.

AN: So how would you track down whether these people had died or not?

MJ: I remember going to Ogmere and you would go round the houses there and ask about people that had left. You would have an electoral roll in front of you and you would go from there.

AN: So the people who weren't on the roll, you would go to where they had lived.

MJ: Yes and you would find someone then who could remember, so and so next door, and you would have a bit of information from there, and anyone who had died then you would have to find out where they died, and any relatives, and find a death certificate. Oh I loved that. No flagging at all. And the times I ended up in a cemetery, looking at gravestones.

AN: And you would be driving around by this time.

MJ: Yes.

AN: So was it that you didn't have a car, or was it you learnt to drive?

MJ: I learnt to drive in 1969 and then I was given a unit car. Yes I was very fortunate with that, because I could come and go then as I wanted to, but I was all over the place. Oh I went to Coventry for one day to do a study up there on Asian women, Indian women. I bought my tortoise in Coventry. He's 29 now.

AN: That was just one day you went?

MJ: Yes I drove up and came back on the same day.

JH: You went there a couple of times.

MJ: I stopped over night once. That's right I went up one day and I came back the next, so that was just to ferry people, and Dr Elwood and a dentist and Dr Burr as well.

AN: Yes I think they measured vitamin C and other things didn't they. I don't think I know which study that was.

MJ: Dr Burr did a lot of work with the elderly and that was another one of my projects, going around to see them, and they would chat forever, you couldn't get away from there. And they used to love Dr Burr, because he used to shout. Because they could all hear what he was saying. That was in Caerphilly I think. Oh that was a long time ago.

AN: You worked at the Unit for 30 years altogether.

MJ: Yes.

AN: I am just interested that you stayed so long, you must have enjoyed it.

MJ: Yes I did, it was varied work and I did enjoy it, you were meeting people and seeing different places. I mean I didn't know where Mountain Ash was when I started really, I knew it was over that mountain, but that was it, and I went to Barry. That was a nice little job I had was giving out milk tokens, everyone used to like to see me then.

AN: You never thought of leaving?

MJ: No, not really, I did toy with the idea of going nursing once, but no, the hours suited me. As I say I enjoyed my work and I used to like clerical work you see, and I had a bit of everything with the Unit.

AN: What are your memories of the best things about the Unit, the best times?

MJ: The companionship. I missed that when I finished work and Janie's kept me in touch with everyone and that has been great. I mean it wasn't all plain sailing, but it was quite a friendly unit up to a point. When I first started there, I didn't think it was, some people were just a little bit aloof, some of them, but the majority of them were quite nice. Diana Seys-Prosser was very kind to me and Mrs Kilpatrick, she was very nice to me, but of course I wasn't involved with anything that they were doing, so I wasn't treading on any toes.

AN: What things do you remember about it that were not so good? What wasn't so nice about working at the Unit if anything?

MJ: I can't really remember. Oh Mrs Williams the health visitor, she lived in Maerdy as well, and she was fine to me until she found out we had to do protocols for some study, and she found out that I was earning over a £1000 per year, and she got very upset about that. And she changed overnight. She didn't like that at all, that a little girl from Maerdy should be earning that money, because it was quite good money at that time.

AN: You talked about companionship with people like Janie and other colleagues, how were the relationships with the scientific staff like Dr Elwood and Professor Cochrane?

MJ: Oh well Dr Elwood was always friendly and very approachable. I didn't have much to do with Professor Cochrane, I don't think he cared much, well he didn't know much, who was there or who wasn't there, but it was like a 'them and us' situation at one point. They used to have these Friday morning meetings and we were never invited, but generally it was quite a nice atmosphere there.

AN: But you were more included later? You started coming to the Friday meetings did you?

MJ: That changed for some reason, I can't remember what, and we were all invited then, but then he made the excuse that the floor would give way, because we were all in one room.

AN: How much did you have to do when they were planning a new study?

MJ: I don't think we had much to do with it at all then. They decided what they wanted to do, and how it was going to be done, and then they would tell you what they wanted and then you just worked and recruited or whatever you were asked to do.

AN: Presumably you would help a bit, in terms of saying 'well that's not practical, I have tried that before' or 'that's going to take twice as long as you think'.

MJ: Well we used to try and put our point forward and I don't know whether they listened, but we always did visiting with cards, and they wanted lists or something, and things weren't practical, these cards were invaluable to us, because there was so much information on them. I can't remember now. Oh we used to have these questionnaires, there was always a questionnaire, a long questionnaire that people used to get fed up of filling in by the end you know.

AN: Another thing that's interesting is that you were employed essentially by MRC that was based in London. Were you aware of this, I wonder if there was any sense that you were working for MRC?

MJ: No, nothing really. I mean we never saw anyone. Dr Elwood used to go up to London to meetings.

AN: They used to visit and inspect the Unit I guess, but they wouldn't have come round to meet anybody who worked there?

JH: Not in Richmond Road, they did in Llandough, but not in Richmond Road, never saw them, faceless. Absolutely faceless. We worked for Dr Elwood didn't we, not MRC. They just paid us.

MJ: Yes, yes.

AN: Another thing that is interesting within the units, is what motivated some of the people because Professor Cochrane, if anything, was fairly, left wing, and Dr Elwood had a very strong faith as did some of the other members of the Unit. I wonder if you were either aware of it, or whether you had a similar, in some sense, calling. I am just wondering if people who worked in these sorts of unit had something that drove them to do it, or that made them enjoy it, maybe it's just chance.

MJ: I found Dr Elwood such a brainy man, it's unbelievable, and very, very approachable. I never knew about his religion, but he was such a Christian man, he was so helpful.

AN: When you think back are there any other particular things that you remember, when you were talking, did you have friends elsewhere that were peculiar to the Unit, that were different? Did you think gosh that's a funny way to do things? Were there things that you felt you were aware that were different, that felt different from a job elsewhere, different from the bank?

MJ: Yes, entirely different to the bank. What I liked about working at the Unit was that you had an insight into other jobs, and one of my jobs was looking at death certificates and things like that, and I had to go into the registrar's in Pontypridd at one time and I spent a long time there, going through the records and if ever I had wanted a different job, that's the job I would have liked, because I liked keeping records, as Carol used to say, 'you used to enjoy playing post-offices when you were young', and I would say 'yes'. But I used to like recordkeeping.

AN: You preferred that to the visits?

MJ: Yes, I think I did up to a point. I didn't mind the visiting. It was very lonely at times.

AN: Did you ever feel threatened or get into awkward situations? These days people are very aware about having women working, and when they do fieldwork we give them mobile phones, we get them to tell us exactly where they are going to be.

MJ: Yes I think you need it now, I wouldn't like to do it now. But when we started it was fine. I did have one sort of hair-raising experience, I knocked at a house in Wattstown, a village a couple of miles away, and this man opened the door, and I asked for his wife, and he said come in, and so I went into the house, and he closed the door behind me, and he said 'my wife died' and I did feel a bit anxious then. But in latter years, it's not a nice job, and this visiting, especially evening visiting, and things like that, I wouldn't want to do it now, definitely not.

AN: So what sort of things changed, did you notice about visiting over the years?

MJ: Well it all depended where you were. You know I would visit in the Rhondda and I would be fine and then we would go to Caerphilly and that would be fine as well, except for no-go areas. There was Graig-Y-Rhacca, which was a council estate that had a bad reputation, and there was Lansbury Park, and those were the two that you didn't go [to] if you could help it. I had to go.

AN: And when you went there, did you go with someone?

MJ: Well, no, you were on your own. But sometimes then, there was one man I had to see, I was doing ECG home visits then, and there was one man in Trethomas, and he kept an axe on the mantelpiece and I had to go there twice and I did ask for someone to go with me then. Janie came with me then. When we did the heart survey in Caerphilly, I had to do a lot of home visits, but, of course, you were doing them every few years, so you know they knew about you, and you knew them, when you were going back, I mean three or four times. So you didn't feel threatened or anything.

AN: It was a lot easier, once you had been once.

MJ: Yes, but you still had to see men on your own, and go further afield.

JH: In the last phase of Caerphilly I saw 400 odd.

MJ: Because they were getting older and they didn't want to be bothered anymore. They had been with us for 15 years, so they had had enough. But there were quite a few home visits then. That was hard work. It was backbreaking, you know you were on your knees, doing ECGs and things like that. It was much easier for them to come into the clinic.

AN: I think the hours were quite long, certainly for the Caerphilly clinics.

MJ: When we started it, they were very long, and we used to see about 20 or 30 men a night I think it was. And we used to work two evenings a week, and that was a 12-hour day for me, and I used to find that hard,

although I was a lot younger then, but towards the end it was a lot easier, because Janie used to drop in and we used to have early finishes, but, of course, most of them had retired anyway then.

AN: And did you almost get to know these men?

MJ: Never saw them before in my life! We went abroad for a holiday and we met Welsh people there and one happened to be on the survey in Caerphilly and I said I have got to see your chest, because I don't recognize your face! Oh we started off with 4,000 wasn't it, X-rayed, everything. And you didn't have time to look at their faces. No it was like a production line. Yes I would say 'undress to the waist for me', and I would turn my back and then he would be there with his trousers down round his ankles. And I would say 'oh not your trousers'.

AN: So you did ECGs, did you take blood or things like that?

MJ: No, no I didn't take blood. I used to make the appointments for Dr Elwood to take blood and then I would ferry him around and I only wish I had had power steering on my car then, stopping, starting, reversing.

AN: And you did their heights and weights in the milk study. What other things did you do. I am just trying to work out, because you said you turned your hand to everything, you certainly did the book-keeping, visitings, ECGs, heights and weights, anything else, other things you did or were expected to do? You didn't take blood.

JH: You kept all the death certificates for the Rhondda 40th follow up.

MJ: Yes. And I used to arrange with the councils to see their death registers, so that we could pick out the men we wanted, and I kept that up to date for a long time after. And there was a printout and I used to mark them off on there. Then they lost interest in it then. How many are left now I don't know. It's like the Caerphilly study, how many are left of that now?

JH: 1,600.

MJ: Still as much as that?

JH: 1,500 or 1,600

AN: Do you miss working?

MJ: Yes and no. I like being at home. I don't know where I found the time to work. I am very tied now with my mother obviously, but I loved it while I was there, but now that I have finished I have put it behind me and I rarely think about it now. I like to see Janie and we meet up now and again, but I can't get out now like I used to.

AN: And if you had the chance would you go back and do some more?

MJ: No, I wouldn't, that's it. I miss my recordkeeping, but no I am too old for that anyway, that's how I feel.

AN: Is there anything else we should talk about, Janie?

JH: I don't think so.

MJ: I just can't think what I did for 30 years.

JH: It sounds quite a lot to me.

MJ: But the time just went. The only thing I have got against the Unit is that I think they should have had more financial advice at the end, not at the end, about adding to our pensions and things like that. No-one ever discussed money with us at all and I have never been interested in money, I have had enough to live on, and that was it, but it's now that I am on pension that I see the folly of my ways, but, of course, I didn't know anything. If we had had a bit more advice on investing in our futures.

AN: And you were on the permanent staff after a while, weren't you?

MJ: Yes, you see that was another thing, because that affected my pension as well, because I wasn't established for two years after I joined the Unit, and then I paid the married woman's stamp, which means I have only got a limited amount of state pension you see. You just don't know about these things when you are in your thirties, you just don't think. I mean 'retirement' was a word that I never thought would come to me.

JH: And you were in the union weren't you?

AN: I was in the union.

JH: So you would have thought that you would have had more advice from them.

MJ: Nothing at all.

AN: Which union was that?

MJ: I can't remember.

JH: Clive Jenkins's, CSPU or something like that, or CPSU [Civil Public & Services Union] wasn't it?

MJ: Yes, Irene was in it as well.

AN: Because there was no personnel department in the Unit was there?

MJ: Not in our unit.

JH: Everything was in headquarters, and we rarely had any contact whatsoever. You got your pay sent to you at the end of the month and that was the amount of contact. Faceless, absolutely faceless people.

AN: And they never wrote to you when you retired?

MJ: Oh yes I had a letter, one letter. One line saying 'thank you for your services' or something.

JH: That's right, that was with the early retirement cheque, there was a letter enclosing the cheque and thank you for your services.

AN: And you retired early?

JH: Well it was called, we knew five years before we finished, it was called ERCS, early retirement something something, because the Unit was closing when I was coming to 60 years of age. So they were making us redundant, but it was called early retirement and we were given a package.

MJ: It worked out alright for me actually, because I was 58 when I retired and my mother had had a fall a year or two before, and so I would have had to finish eventually, because she was getting worse you see. She's 92 now. But you know work wise it worked out alright for me really. I never thought about my pension when I was younger.

JH: We were never informed about additional voluntary contributions.

MJ: But I am sure there were people in the Unit that did know about it. What's her name was very good, C Glenys. She was very sharp, she knew everything and she made it her business to find out if she didn't know. But I never thought about it myself.

AN: And you retired in, what year was it?

MJ: 1997.

AN: So not that long ago.

MJ: Three years now. It has gone very quickly. I can't believe it, I don't know where I found time to work, I really don't. But I did enjoy working for the Unit while I was there and I liked driving and going and finding the different roads here there and everywhere.

JH: And then we went up for blood then. And I remember Dr Elwood, we had written to these people to say that we were in the area and be calling on spec more or less, and we went up this drive and some woman shouted 'get from here' oh she was really annoyed and I think even Dr Elwood was frightened. He turned tail and came back.

AN: You also collected heart tissue I think for one study didn't you?

MJ: I did yes, I can't really remember, but that was up in the Llanelli area and I used to go to different hospitals. There was Nevill Hall [Abergavenny] I visited and Llanelli, quite a few. There was a handful and then they would pay the mortuary attendant so much per tissue, but I used to carry that in the back of my car quite happily. I had waste blood in the back once and it went off and the smell was terrible.

JH: Fred (Moore) used to collect it for his roses. The residue.

MJ: We were doing this survey in Porth and we all stopped for lunch there and Fred comes out with this syringe and it was full of tomato sauce and it looked for all the world like blood and he put it all over his fish and chips or whatever he was having, and we all shouted, it looked terrible.

AN: Thank you very much for your time.

[END OF TRANSCRIPT]

Further related resources:

1. Ness A R, Reynolds L A, Tansey E M (eds) (2002) *Population-Based Research in South Wales: The MRC Pneumoconiosis Research Unit and the MRC Epidemiology Unit*. Wellcome Witnesses to Twentieth Century Medicine, vol. 13. London: The Wellcome Trust Centre for the History of Medicine at UCL.
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