

## Jones, Marvin: Making a Day <sup>[1]</sup>

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## Marvin Jones: Making a day

by David Cecelski. "[Listening to History](#) <sup>[2]</sup>," *News & Observer*. Published 2/8/2004. Copyrighted. Reprinted with permission.

Marvin Jones started working for the Export Leaf Tobacco Company in Wilson in 1946. At that time, Wilson was the largest bright-leaf tobacco market in the world. The buying, processing and selling of tobacco to cigarette companies was the city's lifeblood. The cry of the warehouse auctioneers, the aroma of the cured leaf, and the early morning procession of thousands of tobacco factory workers across the railroad tracks were all part of daily life.

Now 80 years old, nearly blind, but as full of vinegar and good humor as ever, Marvin Jones was a leaf factory worker for more than three decades. He was also a leader in Wilson's tobacco labor union movement. The first leaf workers union, Local 259-T, Tobacco Workers International Union, was founded at his tobacco factory just after the Second World War. Leaf workers in Greenville, Goldsboro, Kinston and other tobacco markets soon followed in 259-T's footsteps. They proved to be a stunning exception to the region's anti-union reputation.

At his home in Wilson, Jones recalled the strong, and sometimes irreverent, camaraderie that enlivened tobacco factory life and laid a foundation for that historic labor movement.



Marvin Jones. Photo by Chris Seward, 2004. To request permission for ~~Marvin Jones~~ to purchase a print, please contact the *News & Observer*.

"I had quite a few family members who worked in tobacco factories. My mother, she worked in there. My grandfather, he used to haul tobacco from the warehouse back to the factory. He used to stand on the back of the truck and hold tobacco. Wilson was known for tobacco more than any other town in eastern Carolina. They weren't doing too many other jobs. They had a cotton gin, but just one, and two fertilizer mills or something like that, but everybody else worked in the tobacco. I was about 14 when I started cropping tobacco. A car would come pick us up, take us out into the fields, bring us back. It was about a four- or five-month crop and that was it. In other words, if you lived in Wilson, they said you had to be one. Getting the tobacco out of the field, that was the first thing. Then the farmers hang it up in the barn and cure it, then take it to the market and sell it. That's when you bring it to the factory. The women picked "foreign matter" out of the tobacco, I learned how to do everything around that factory. No blacks could be graders, not then, but I even learned how to grade that tobacco by color, how heavy it is, the body of the tobacco. You didn't have any black foremen back then either. On We worked six days a week. But see, one thing about Mr. Davis, the man that trained me, on Saturday we didn't do nothing. We might dig a hole out there in the ground, put a piece of wire over it, barbecue a chicken and play dice, drink liquor. All of us were just like that, every one of us. We were together. Say, for instance, this boy Snoop's brother died in D.C., OK? So he wants to go up there to his brother's funeral. No problem. Go. He left and he didn't come back to work 'cause Girl named Lois Burch -- she was our sweeper. When she finished high school, she went to college. She'd be in college three or four weeks and every week she'd get her money. See, Mr. Davis carried her time. Boy named Thomas Barnes, I Or me -- they know that I'm a fireman. When the whistle blows, they know I have to go because it might be their house. Ain't no question about that. Celebrity Warehouse caught on fire one night. I stayed out all there all night. I hadn't had no sleep when I went to work, so he says, "Well, Marvin, hang around two or three hours and then go home and get some sleep." Like I said, we were ji You had all types of fellows out there. Now this fellow I was talking about, Thomas Barnes, that's the one that played football. One time he was coming on this side of the track, we call it, on a Sunday afternoon, and these two white guys met So 9 o'clock Monday, Tommy went on up there. About 9:30, 10 or 12 of us got in our cars and we went up to the courtroom. The judge said, "You mean to tell me, you beat both of these fellows here?" Thomas said, "Yes sir, judge. If you dor Judge said, "Hold it, Thomas, you can't do that!" But you see, when the judge called him up there, Tommy looked up and saw all of us sitting out there. He saw us. He knew we were there for him. He knew we wouldn't leave him up there by |

### Additional information from NCpedia editors at the State Library of North Carolina :

Marvin Jones lived from November 18, 1923 - June 1, 2014.

Obituary: Marvin Jones. Stevens Family Funeral Home: <http://www.stevensfamilyfuneralhome.com/notices/Marvin-Jones> <sup>[3]</sup>

### Subjects:

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### Authors:

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### Origin - location:

[Wilson County](#) <sup>[8]</sup>

[Wilson](#) <sup>[9]</sup>

### From:

[Listening to History, News and Observer.](#) <sup>[10]</sup>

### Years:

November 18, 1923 - June 1, 2014

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