

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Helen Jones Woods

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## Overview of the Collection

<b>Repository:</b>	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
<b>Creator:</b>	Woods, Helen Jones, 1923-
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Helen Jones Woods,
<b>Dates:</b>	October 6, 2007
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2007
<b>Physical Description:</b>	4 Betacame SP videocassettes (1:41:47).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Trombonist Helen Jones Woods (1923 - 2020) was the original trombonist of The International Sweethearts of Rhythm. She was part of the first group of African American women to tour with the USO during World War II. Woods was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on October 6, 2007, in Omaha, Nebraska. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2007_281
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Licensed practical nurse and trombonist Helen Elizabeth Jones Woods was born in 1923 in Meridian, Mississippi. Woods began her life in a Mississippi orphanage for white children. When it became obvious that she was not white, Woods was adopted by Professor Laurence Clifton Jones, the founder and director of Piney Woods Country Life School, and his wife. After the sudden death of Jones' wife, Woods, at the age of four, became part of the general population of the school where she enjoyed music and special programs. Helen Keller, George Washington Carver and other luminaries visited the Piney Woods campus. Woods was a member of the school's traveling and fundraising band, Cotton Blossom Singers, which was directed by Consuela Carter. In 1937, Jones formed the Swinging Rays of Rhythm, another all-girl band led by Carter. The band toured extensively throughout the eastern United States to raise money for the school. In 1941, Woods and several other girls left Piney Woods when they found out that some of them would not graduate because they had been touring with the band instead of going to class.

The band relocated to Arlington, Virginia where it was renamed The International Sweethearts of Rhythm due to the diverse racial and ethnic composition of its members. Comprised of African American, Asian, Mexican, Native American, and Caucasian girls ranging in age from fourteen to nineteen years old, the sixteen-piece band continued under the management of Daniel Gary. Although the band's lineup changed frequently, it attracted many talented musicians. The original members included Woods on trombone, Pauline Braddy on drums and Willie May Wong on saxophone. Anna Mae Winburn, former leader of the Cotton Club Boys in North Omaha, Nebraska, was appointed the band leader. The band's first composer was Eddie Durham, with Jesse Stone taking over in 1941. Later members included trumpeter-vocalist Ernestine "Tiny" Davis and saxophonist Vi Burnside. The band headlined venues such as the Apollo Theater and Washington, D.C.'s Howard Theatre, where in 1941 it set a box office record of 35,000 patrons in a single week. As a member of the band, Woods was one of the first African American women to tour with the United Services Organizations (USO) during World War II, traveling to France and Germany. Groundbreaking in its all-female and racially integrated lineup, The International Sweethearts of

Rhythm also received great critical acclaim for its musical talent.

After the original band dissolved in 1949, Woods traveled to Omaha where she eventually settled down and married William A. Woods, the first black man to get an accounting degree from Creighton University. Woods served as a licensed practical nurse at Douglas County Hospital for twenty-three years, retiring in the 1970s. She is the mother of four children, including media mogul Cathy Hughes. Woods was inducted into the Omaha Black Music Hall of Fame in 2007.

Helen Jones Woods was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on October 6, 2007.

Woods passed away on July 25, 2020.

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## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Helen Jones Woods was conducted by Larry Crowe on October 6, 2007, in Omaha, Nebraska, and was recorded on 4 Betacame SP videocassettes. Trombonist Helen Jones Woods (1923 - 2020) was the original trombonist of The International Sweethearts of Rhythm. She was part of the first group of African American women to tour with the USO during World War II.

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## Restrictions

### Restrictions on Access

Restrictions may be applied on a case-by-case basis at the discretion of The HistoryMakers®.

### Restrictions on Use

All use of materials and use credits must be pre-approved by The HistoryMakers®. Appropriate credit must be given. Copyright is held by The HistoryMakers®.

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## Related Material

Information about the administrative functions involved in scheduling, researching, and producing the interview, as well as correspondence with the interview subject is stored electronically both on The HistoryMakers® server and in two databases maintained by The HistoryMakers®, though this information is not included in this finding aid.

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## Controlled Access Terms

This interview collection is indexed under the following controlled access subject terms.

### Persons:

Woods, Helen Jones, 1923-

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

## Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews  
Woods, Helen Jones, 1923- --Interviews

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African American jazz musicians--Interviews.

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African American women musicians--Interviews.

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African American nurses--Interviews.

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## Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

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The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

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International Sweethearts of Rhythm

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## Occupations:

Trombonist

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## HistoryMakers® Category:

MusicMakers

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## Administrative Information

### Custodial History

Interview footage was recorded by The HistoryMakers®. All rights to the interview have been transferred to The HistoryMakers® by the interview subject through a signed interview release form. Signed interview release forms have been deposited with Jenner & Block, LLP, Chicago.

### Preferred Citation

The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Helen Jones Woods, October 6, 2007. The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection, 1900 S. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Illinois.

### Processing Information

This interview collection was processed and encoded on 5/30/2023 by The HistoryMakers® staff. The finding aid was created adhering to the following standards: DACS, AACR2, and the Oral History Cataloging Manual (Matters 1995).

## Other Finding Aid

A Microsoft Access contact database and a FileMaker Pro tracking database, both maintained by The HistoryMakers®, keep track of the administrative functions involved in scheduling, researching, and producing the interview.

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## Detailed Description of the Collection

### Series I: Original Interview Footage

Video Oral History Interview with Helen Jones Woods, Section A2007\_281\_001\_001, TRT: 0:29:06 ?

Helen Jones Woods was born in 1923 in Meridian, Mississippi to an African American father and a white mother, who left her in a white orphanage. The orphanage was segregated, and did not allow Jones Woods to stay after she was determined to be African American. Instead, Grace Morris Allen Jones and her husband, Laurence C. Jones, were asked to adopt her. Jones Woods' adoptive father was raised in Missouri, and graduated from the University of Iowa in Iowa City. He then moved to Piney Woods, Mississippi, where he founded the Piney Woods Country Life School to provide education to the poor African American children of Mississippi. To raise funds for the institution, Jones Woods' adoptive father organized several vocal ensembles that performed throughout the country. Jones Woods' adoptive mother raised her until her death when Jones was four years old. After that time, Jones Woods lived in the dormitories at the Piney Woods Country Life School, which also had a library, classrooms and a Lutheran church.

African American families.

Piney Woods School.

Johnston, J. Bennett (John Bennett), 1932-.

Adoption--United States.

African American children.

Video Oral History Interview with Helen Jones Woods, Section A2007\_281\_001\_002, TRT: 0:29:28 ?

Helen Jones Woods' adoptive father, Laurence C. Jones, founded the Piney Woods Country Life School in Piney Woods, Mississippi, where there were no other institutions to educate African American children. At the school, students learned trade skills, in addition to completing general coursework. Jones initially faced discrimination from the school's white neighbors, but eventually convinced them that an educated workforce would benefit them. In addition, Jones taught his students music, and established an all-girl band, The International Sweethearts of Rhythm, to raise money for the school. Jones Woods developed an interest in music at an early age; and, at fifteen years old, began travelling with the band. Two years later, the group decided to disassociate from the school, and perform as an independent group. They settled in Washington, D.C., where they played in nightclubs alongside such performers as Moms Mabley. Later, they travelled overseas to perform for soldiers during World War II.

African American children.

Piney Woods School.  
International Sweethearts of Rhythm.  
African American women musicians.  
Women jazz musicians.  
United Service Organizations (U.S.).

Video Oral History Interview with Helen Jones Woods, Section A2007\_281\_001\_003, TRT:  
0:29:08 ?

Helen Jones Woods played the trombone with the International Sweethearts of Rhythm in Washington, D.C., and overseas during World War II. The all-girl band played alongside such notable performers as comedian Moms Mabley, singer Billie Holiday and tap dancers Fayard Nicholas and Harold Nicholas. During the later years of the war, they travelled to France and Germany to perform for the African American troops. The group disbanded upon returning to the United States, and Jones Woods settled in Omaha, Nebraska at the home of the band's former chaperone, Rae Lee Jones. Jones Woods later married William A. Woods, the first African American graduate of the accounting program at Creighton University in Omaha. Rather than return to music, Jones Woods became a licensed practical nurse at the Douglas County Health Center, where she worked until her retirement. Jones Woods reflects upon her life and legacy, as well as her hopes and concerns for the African American community.

International Sweethearts of Rhythm.  
United Service Organizations (U.S.).  
African American musicians.  
Women jazz musicians.  
World War, 1939-1945--Participation, African American.  
African American families--Nebraska.  
African Americans--Marriage.  
African American nurses.

Video Oral History Interview with Helen Jones Woods, Section A2007\_281\_001\_004, TRT:  
0:14:05 ?

Helen Jones Woods talks about her children, Jackie Woods, Cathy Hughes, Billy Woods and Bobby Woods, as well as her six grandchildren. She describes how she would like to be remembered, and concludes the interview by narrating her photographs.

African American families--Nebraska.  
Women jazz musicians.