Frederick McKinley Jones Biography

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Biography

A man with only a sixth-grade education, Frederick Jones transformed the food industry and America's eating habits with his invention of a practical refrigeration system for trucks and railroad cars.

Born in Cincinnati, Ohio, Jones was orphaned at the age of nine and was then raised by a priest in Kentucky. Jones left school after grade six and left the rectory to return to Cincinnati at age sixteen, where he got a job as an apprentice automobile mechanic. He boosted his natural mechanical ability and inventive mind with independent reading and study. In 1912, Jones moved to Hallock, Minnesota, where he worked as a mechanic on a 50,000-acre farm. After service with the U.S. Army in World War I, Jones returned to Hallock; while employed as a mechanic, Jones taught himself electronics and built a transmitter for the town's new radio station. He also invented a device to combine sound with motion pictures. This attracted the attention of Joseph A. Numero of Minneapolis, Minnesota, who hired Jones in 1930 to improve the sound equipment made by his firm, Cinema Supplies, Inc. On June 17, 1939, Jones received his first patent, for a ticket-dispensing machine for movie houses.

Around 1935, Jones designed a portable air-cooling unit for trucks carrying perishable food, and received a patent for it on July 12, 1940. Numero sold his movie sound equipment business to RCA and formed a new company in partnership with Jones, the U.S. Thermo Control Company (later the Thermo King Corporation) which became a $3 million business by 1949. Jones's air coolers for trains, ships, and aircraft made it possible for the first time to ship perishable food long distances during any time of the year. Portable cooling units designed by Jones were especially important during World War II, preserving blood, medicine, and food for use at army hospitals and on battlefields.

During his life, Jones was awarded sixty-one patents. Forty were for refrigeration equipment, while others went for portable X-ray machines, sound equipment, and gasoline engines. In 1944, Jones became the first African-American to be elected into the American Society of Refrigeration Engineers, and during the 1950s he was a consultant to the U.S. Department of Defense and the Bureau of Standards. Jones died of lung cancer in Minneapolis in 1961. He was inducted into the Minnesota Inventors Hall of Fame in 1977.