

J. T. Rice, Jr.  
Asheville, NC  
Interviewed by Reid Chapman  
August 15, 2003

Looking back across a life that spans 79 years, James Thomas Rice, Sr. reflects that he "was a pretty ambitious young man." He was born on July 9, 1924 in Gentry Park, not far from Woodfin. Just a few days prior to J.T.'s thirteenth birthday, his father, Curtis J. Rice, bought out the Hyer-Newman Funeral Home in West Asheville and opened Anders Rice Funeral Home. With Burgin Anders as the funeral director and the Reverend Scott Vehaun as a silent partner, Curtis Rice began a family business that has spanned three generations. Four years later, J.T. came to West Asheville to work with his father. West Asheville, though a vibrant community in 1941, was "not quite as big as it is now." J. T. Rice also graduated from Grace High School that year, one of the last classes to do so before the school merged with Lee Edwards High. Mr. Rice spent many evenings over in West Asheville on late night duty at the funeral home.

That year saw Europe embroiled in conflict and saw the United States edging closer to the brink of war. Though he doesn't now remember many details of life some sixty odd years ago, he imagines when the news of Pearl Harbor broke he was at the funeral home in West Asheville. As the United States took an active leadership role in what became World War II, the funeral home grew to be "a pretty good business." Some of that business came in the form of holding funeral services for local soldiers killed abroad.

Mr. Rice began taking classes in the evenings in pre-med from Mars Hill College. He finished his two-year degree there before enlisting in the Army when he turned 18. But rather than pursue a medical degree, J. T. Rice decided to join the Army Air Corps. He studied to be a flight engineer, the man responsible for the upkeep of the plane, and also became a top turret gunner. He earned his wings prior to leaving the States to be stationed in Nuthamstead, England, where he joined the 398 Bomb Group of the 601st squadron. As part of a ten member B-17 crew that he now describes as "young, ambitious, strong, and healthy," he flew bombing missions over Europe.

Of all the missions he flew in Europe, his last bombing mission stands out clearly in his mind. The target that day was the town of Pilsen, Czechoslovakia. En route, his crew caught their first glimpse of a German jet. "We didn't know what a jet was" at that time, Mr. Rice recollects. "Three or four of us were firing at it and we hit it. I sincerely felt like I hit it, (but) I don't claim credit for it." Rice remembers watching the pilot's parachute open up and thinking "give mercy—we hoped the same if it happened to us."

When rumors began to circulate that the war in Europe was ended, he and his fellow soldiers weren't quite sure. The next day when they found the rumors had substance "we like to tore that place down." Mr. Rice was kept on alert while Allied Forces mopped up in Europe: "we flew and stayed current. We tried to protect fuel, but we got a chance to look the place over." During this time in particular Mr. Rice got a chance to sit in the

pilot's seat. When news of the war's end broke, J.T. remembers that "we had a big ball out."

After returning home from the war, Mr. Rice decided to attend mortuary school on the GI Bill "because Daddy needed help at the funeral home." He says now that he spent a *bit* of time "getting readjusted," but in the next few years Mr. Rice put his energy behind several businesses, including a dry cleaning business near the intersection of Brevard Road and Haywood Road and the Hamlin-Rice Florist, near Haywood Road and Louisiana Avenue. Many of these businesses he "invested, ran for a few years, and sold," all the while offering West Asheville vital services. In the 1950s he joined the West Asheville Business Association. He also became very active in local organizations. He joined the West Asheville Kiwanis club, where he eventually became president and the lieutenant governor of Division 1. His wife recalls that with all his activities "he was not a knife and fork member. He worked." Through the Shriners he became active in the Burn Center, often transporting ill kids at no charge.

He also began flying after the war, He was the charter president of the Western North Carolina Pilots Association. For eight years he sat on the Asheville Airport Authority and for two of those years he was the chairman. He has owned four airplanes since World War II and used them for his business and pleasure, as well as his many community service activities. About nine years ago, after nearly 50 years of flying, he gave it up. Though he now misses it a great deal, he remains quite active. He still goes to work everyday here in West Asheville, as he has done for over 60 years.