

Generations of STEM:

Frederick McKinley Jones

“Cool” Inventor

Jones did not have an easy childhood. Born to a black mother and white father, his mother left the family when he was young. Struggling to raise him, his father left him to be raised by a priest at age seven and subsequently died when Jones was nine. By age eleven, Jones was on his own and working as an automobile mechanic.

Jones eventually served in the Army for WWI, which fueled his passion for invention. Two of his inventions were the box office ticketing device, and a way to play back recorded sound, enabling talking pictures.

Jones next turned his attention to cooling, and eventually patented a portable air-cooling system for trucks carrying food. He used one of his prior inventions, a self-starting motor, and formed a company with his boss, the U.S. Thermo Control Company. That company became Thermo King—still around today—and his refrigeration later was used during WWII for storing blood at military camps. This air-cooling system allowed for frozen foods and fresh foods from longer distances to be sold at grocery stores, previously limited to canned and dry goods. Jones was posthumously awarded the National Medal of Technology, the first African American to receive the award. In all, he was awarded 61 patents during his lifetime.



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