

THE UNTOLD STORY OF DAVEY JONES: BROWNSVILLE'S RING-A-BELL MAN

As he lingered outside the closed bedroom door of the house on Brownsville hill, lines of worry creased the Welshman's brow. He could hear the cries of his nineteen-year-old wife Laura as she strained to give birth to his son.

Inside the bedroom the perspiring doctor tried once more to coax the infant's head through the birth canal, but the weakening gasps of the exhausted girl in the bed reminded him that two fragile lives now rested in his hands. Grimly he reached for the instruments at his side. A few moments later the deed was done.

The weary mother would survive.

It was September 22, 1892. The anxious husband, an immigrant coal miner named William "Jonesy" Jones, had arrived in Brownsville in 1891 and within a year married Laura Thomas, a girl less than half his age. Laura, the eldest daughter of David and Eliza Gaskill Thomas, had now presented him with his first child, a son named David.

But the doctor's frantic rush to deliver this infant quickly and spare its mother's life had exacted a terrible price. The tiny newborn was roughly pulled from his struggling mother's body, his head entrapped in the unforgiving grip of steel medical instruments. The tragic result was immediately apparent – severe cranial deformity and, most likely, irreversible brain damage.

In those days it was not unusual in such unfortunate circumstances to allow nature to take its course with the baby. Minimal effort was expended by the doctor to treat the ill-fated child. Whispered condolences – "it will die shortly; it's for the best" – hung in the air as the gathered family awaited the inevitable.

But the baby's grandmother was not willing to passively rely upon Providence to save her first grandchild's life. A determined Eliza Thomas tended the deformed baby as best she could, patiently feeding

him with an eyedropper. Through her loving care and against all odds, the baby survived. And thus began the story of Davey Jones.

“When I read in your column about that poorly costumed Santa Claus who chanted ‘Ring-A-Bell’ on the streets of Brownsville in the thirties and forties, I knew that your reader, Rick Shaffer, was talking about my relative, Davey Jones.”

The comment came in an email from Bill Patterson of Wesleyville, Pennsylvania.

“Though separated from me by a full generation in time,” Bill wrote, “Davey Jones was a full cousin of mine. My mother Bessie was Laura’s youngest sister, twenty-two years younger than Laura was.

“I now realize that I am the only one left who knows the full story of Davey Jones, who in his day probably had more name and sight recognition than anyone in the Brownsville area. When Davey passed through an area with his bell and sign, little kids followed him as if he were the Pied Piper.

“Davey’s story was a sad one, yet at times funny and inherently very happy. Since so many people still remember him, perhaps they would be interested in his story.”

The difficult delivery of her son took its toll on Laura Jones. She lived to have two more children, but she was, in Bill Patterson’s words, “never the same again. As life went on, she was beset with increasing emotional problems. She eventually required commitment, and in 1927 she died in an institution at the age of fifty-five. Her husband Bill passed away within days of her death.”

As Davey was growing up, he, his siblings, and often his father lived with his grandparents, David and Eliza Thomas. Their large frame house, long since razed, was the first one built on Playford Avenue.

“Little Davey never had a chance at a normal life,” Bill Patterson explained. “His natal injuries left him an eternal child. He was quite sound emotionally, but learning was stunted and came with great difficulty, though it did come and continued throughout his life. Clear speech also came very slowly but eventually was quite adequate. Davey never learned to read, but he did master numbers and money well enough to make change.

“He had a very even disposition, always took a childlike joy in small pleasures, and probably enjoyed life more than any ‘normal’ person you or I are likely to know. He was innocent of most ‘adult’ concerns, as he never reached that plateau. Though small in stature, only

five foot two, he was quite strong. I believe he may even have worked in a coal mine for a while, though he was only capable of menial tasks with supervision.

“He could not manage his affairs. If he carried money, there were those predatory people around who would take it away from him in the guise of gambling, like taking candy from a baby. He was kind and wouldn’t hurt a flea. Davey was fortunate in that there were always relatives who saw to it that he had a place to stay, good food, and clean clothes. Still, he would disappear at times for days or weeks. When he inevitably came back, he wouldn’t offer a word about where he had been.”

In 1917, when Davey was twenty-four years old, the United States entered World War I and military draft conscription was instituted. Incredibly, Davey was drafted.

“Apparently someone on the local board in Brownsville got caught up in an overzealous attempt to meet his quota,” Bill Patterson theorized. “Whatever the reasoning or lack thereof, Davey Jones was drafted into the army. It was a fiasco, of course.

“He was sent for infantry training to Camp Green, North Carolina, in the fall of 1917. For some months they did what they could, and probably Davey pulled a lot of KP duty during that time. But by the following spring they had had enough, and Davey was sent back home to Brownsville with his uniform, an honorable discharge, and \$22.40 in his pocket. The reason for the discharge was penned in as ‘defective mental development’ and he was not recommended for re-enlistment.

“But events often have unforeseen consequences, and this part of Davey’s story was not finished. By the early 1930s, the Depression had hit hard with blows of sledgehammer intensity. Money was scarce, and many veterans were seeking pensions and/or bonuses.

“Davey’s aunt (my mother, who was actually younger than he, though he always called her Aunt Bess) took Davey to Pittsburgh to whatever the Veteran’s Administration was called then. In those days one could take an early train to Pittsburgh, a relatively short walk to the relevant government offices, and finally catch an evening train back to Brownsville. During a day of examinations and interviews Davey was poked, prodded, and questioned.

“In the end there was a medical officer who had the final say-so. He had a reputation of being terribly tough on applicants, and few who were undeserving (by that time’s standards) got past that point. After he talked to Davey, he called my mother in and asked rhetorically, ‘They drafted this man into the Army?’

“‘Yes, they did,’ she said.

“Well,’ he said, ‘they are going to pay for that.’

“For the rest of his life, Davey had a modest pension. That doctor was as tough on the government as he was on everyone else.”

For Davey Jones, even more unanticipated twists of fate lay ahead, including the launching of an unusual vocation that made him the most easily recognizable figure in the Brownsville area.

**THE LIFE OF DAVEY JONES HOLDS A
SUBTLE LESSON FOR US ALL**



Davey Jones, bell in hand, looked uncharacteristically self-conscious as he posed in his familiar role as an “advertising man.” Jesse Coldren arranged for this undated portrait to be taken at the Palace Studio in Brownsville.

He was known around Brownsville as the “Ring-A-Bell” man, a diminutive fellow who was a familiar figure on the streets of Brownsville during the thirties and forties. He was often seen in and around town carrying an advertising sign and ringing a bell to attract attention to his client’s current promotion.

His name was Davey Jones, and earlier we learned of his traumatic birth in 1892. The difficult delivery left the first-born son of William and Laura Jones with the lifelong mental capacity of a child, but in his lifetime, Davey’s friendly face became well known in the communities surrounding Brownsville.

After being drafted into the U. S. Army during World War I, Davey was honorably discharged for reasons of diminished mental capacity. In his

mid-twenties by then, he returned to Brownsville, where misfortune soon visited this unlucky young man again.

Bill Patterson of Wesleyville is Davey's cousin. Bill is, in his own words, "the only one left who knows the full story of Davey Jones.

"Sometime near the end of the decade known as the Roaring Twenties," Bill revealed, "Davey had a bad accident. For some reason unknown to me, Davey was at a hotel that was operated in West Brownsville just off of the inter-county bridge. Natural gas outlets were common in all structures, public and private. Small gas burning heaters were readily available, as were the gas cocks to which they could be connected in nearly every room. The heaters were lit with a kitchen match after turning on the valve.

"By current standards they were extremely dangerous, due to the possibility of carbon monoxide poisoning or the accidental opening of the valve. In the vast majority of cases they were handled without incident, but the exceptions were dramatic.

"Just what Davey did is not clear," Bill explained, "but I believe he started the fire. He said he was looking for the heater and lit a match. Another time he said he smelled something and was trying to light a lamp. He probably couldn't remember well in any event.

"Apparently a gas cock had been left open, and he did light a match. The resulting explosion was severe. Davey was seriously burned, with the worst damage occurring to his head and hands. He was in the hospital for an extended stay, and he carried the scars of the incident for the rest of his life. But once again, against the odds, Davey survived."

During the 1930s and 1940s, Davey Jones became one of the most recognizable characters in the valley. Because he would willingly walk for miles and miles without giving it a second thought, Davey was the perfect candidate to handle the kind of job that became his specialty.

"In the several decades encompassing the Depression and World War II," Bill Patterson recalled, "Davey achieved a sight and name recognition that any local politician would have envied. Exactly when it started I cannot say, but somewhere along the line the idea emerged that smalltime local entrepreneurs could utilize Davey to advertise fights, dances, ball games, etc. In those days, there were no television or local radio stations on which to advertise. There was just the newspaper and occasional handbills, which required house by house delivery.

"Davey provided an alternative medium for advertisers. He would carry a sign and walk through as many of the area's small patches, hamlets, and neighborhoods as possible. LaBelle, Allison, Century, Newell, Denbo, and the Vestas were all within walking distance for Davey. He loved to walk. Advertisers would hire Davey for what we

would now call minimum wage (and I suspect somewhat less).

“To attract attention to himself and to his sign, Davey would ring a bell. In another life and time he might have been a percussionist, for he developed a very personalized rhythm with the bell, which he accompanied with the chant, ‘Ring-a-Bell! Ring-a-Bell! Ring-a-Bell!’ Children imitated him and would trail after him when he passed through. It was a scene reminiscent of the Pied Piper of Hamelin.

“This became the central part of Davey’s life. He was never more alive than when he carried the sign and went into his singsong performance. The sign was usually a makeshift placard tacked on to a framework, with a handle that fit into a flag holder slung around his neck. Of course, Davey couldn’t make the sign himself; the advertiser had to supply that. Some of the signs were done with a reasonable artistic flourish. Others were crudely printed, but they were readable and to the point.”

When Davey approached a patch or village, he could usually be heard long before he was spotted. Heads would emerge from kitchen windows, seeking to locate the source of the clanging commotion.

“One could hear the bell from quite a distance,” Bill Patterson said, “and it would bring people out to look. The technique must have been effective, because merchants continued to hire Davey for many years. He was probably the most well-known character in the region. Everybody knew his name and knew him by sight. In his world he was a star, and he enjoyed it immensely.

“For a number of years, the Cohen Wallpaper Store hired Davey for about two weeks during the Christmas season. The store was in a very narrow storeroom in Brownsville’s Neck, approximately opposite to Kart’s Women’s Store. The Cohens hired Davey in order to call attention to the line of seasonal toys and related Christmas offerings that they stocked each December.

“He had arguably the worst Santa outfit ever designed, complete with a Halloween-type Santa mask and scraggly beard. It was dreadful. Rather than the sign on a stick, a sandwich type signboard was used which could be worn or just set up on the sidewalk. But of course, he kept the bell.

“When the Christmas crowds came to town and Davey went into his ‘Ring-A-Bell’ chant, he was in his glory. No one could miss knowing he was there. The Cohens were very nice to Davey and had him back year after year. I must presume they felt he contributed to the success of their Christmas sales campaign. They were serious business people.”

Brownsville’s favorite historian and history teacher, the late Jesse Coldren, was believed to have worked for years on a manuscript about

the history of Brownsville. While writing in the 1940s, Jesse decided that no history of the town would be complete without mentioning one of its most familiar characters. Jesse decided to include a chapter about Davey Jones, and he set the wheels in motion to have Davey's picture taken for inclusion in the book.

"Jesse arranged for the Palace Studio in Brownsville to make a proper portrait of Davey with his banner and bell," Bill told me. "The portrait is very representative of Davey at that time, except that he usually did not appear so somber unless he was apprehensive, and here he appears overly conscious of the camera."

We can only imagine how many miles Davey Jones walked in his lifetime. But even this eternal child began to show the effects of aging, and the time finally came when the bell and banner were put aside.

"He really wasn't up to the walking anymore," said Bill, "and besides, times had changed. On the rare occasion that Davey sought out medical help he went to Dr. Leroy Waggoner, who never tendered a bill. In September of 1956, just short of his 64th birthday, Davey got a bad chest cold that progressed to pneumonia. When Dr. Waggoner became aware of it, he put Davey into the hospital, insisting on the best room available.

"As the illness worsened, Davey's heart, once so strong, could not take the strain and gave out. No bill from the doctor or from Brownsville General Hospital was forthcoming. 'Davey was *my* patient,' was all that Dr. Waggoner would say about it."

Brownsville's unforgettable Ring-A-Bell man was buried among the veterans in the Field of Honor at LaFayette Memorial Park near Brier Hill – easy walking distance from Brownsville.

"Life can be unfathomable," Bill Patterson concluded. "What is a meaningful life? Grandmother Thomas could have let the baby die, but it was not in her nature to do so. Did she do the right thing, or did she compound the disaster?"

The colorful mosaic of Life is incomprehensibly intricate. Even the most unusual piece of that mosaic, if missing from the design, would alter the beauty and balance of the whole. Who among us is capable of understanding how one man's life figures into that delicate Master scheme? Is there truly any life that has no meaning?

For Davey Jones, every day brought the promise of a new adventure. With his always upbeat outlook despite all of the setbacks life handed him, Davey unknowingly taught all who knew him a subtle lesson.

"Davey Jones," said Bill, "was the happiest person I have ever known."