

The story of Melvin Jones

The Founder of Lions Clubs International

Melvin Jones

The Founder of Lions International was born at Fort Thomas, Arizona on January 13, 1879. His father was Captain Calvin Jones of the United States Army, commanding a troop of scouts under General Nelson Miles - the famed Indian fighter. His mother was the former Lydia M. Gibler, who bore and nurtured her infant son under the constant threat of Indian raids.

Fort Thomas was an outpost on the Gila River between the Santa Teresa and Gila Mountains, a short forty miles from the Apache stronghold. Only three years before Melvin's birth, a band of Sioux Indians had surrounded and massacred General Custer's band of scouts in Montana (now in Arizona). The Apaches were making their last stand against the white man's encroachment.

Under Cochise - a great war leader, and later Chief Geronimo - a cruel and brilliant fighter, they slashed viciously at the white man's expanding frontiers, with frequent massacres of both whites and Indians.

Melvin's father was in the thick of fighting until 1886, when Melvin was a lad of seven. Then Geronimo was captured and banished to an Indian reservation in Oklahoma, and the last vestige of the red mans resistance collapsed. Melvin's boyhood memories were a mélange of horses and blue-clad troopers, bugles and war cries, wagon trains, gaunt settlers and dust. Most modern kids, thrilled by the fake cowboys-and-Indians fare on television, would consider it a life of glamour. Not Melvin - he vaguely remembered being boyishly happy when his father was transferred to a new post in the North, and his mother cried tears of happiness when she heard the news.

The Jones family made stops at St Louis and Quincy Illinois, and Melvin attended public schools in both cities. It was a sort of Army life, catch-as-catch-can education. As he grew to young manhood, Melvin filled it out with a course in the Union Business College and a smattering of law at Chaddock College in Quincy. The excitement and confusion of his early boyhood was reflected in his indecision - "I couldn't decide whether to be a lawyer or a tenor, my voice had made me pretty popular in school". But when he moved to Chicago in his twenties, he gave up both law and music, and took a position in the insurance agency of Johnson and Higgins.

The young man was intelligent and alert - by 1913 he was sole owner of the Melvin Jones Insurance Agency, and was on his way. But prior to that in 1909, he met, wooed and married a pretty Chicago girl who was also on her way to becoming one of the great woman golfers of her day. She was Rose Amanda Freeman, who climaxed a spectacular golfing career by winning the National Women's Open Golf title at Pinehurst, North Carolina in 1925. "I was perhaps the first golf widower on record", Melvin often said but didn't mean it, because his wife was a constant helpmate and strong right arm in his early career.

One day, when Melvin Jones was sitting in his insurance office, contemplating life as a successful insurance salesman at the age of thirty-three, a business acquaintance invited him to lunch, *to meet some of the boys*. The *boys* turned out to be members of the Business Circle of Chicago, holding their weekly luncheon in the old Boston Oyster House. They welcomed this *go-getting* young man and made him feel at home.

The Business Circle, like hundreds of similar businessmen's clubs throughout the country was composed of leaders in many fields of trade and commerce. Its slogan, as one surviving member said, was *You scratch my back and I'll scratch yours*. The purpose was business pure and simple - the members patronized each other, boosted each other's services or products, and met solely for the purpose of advancing their own interests.

Young Jones was invited to join, and he did. It was quite a privilege to belong, but to this enthusiastic young man it was also a challenge. He used his salesmanship to vitalize and increase the Business Circle's membership, he introduced new ideas into the club's operation.

In 1915, when one of the older members was nominated for the presidency, he declined to run unless Melvin Jones was elected secretary. They both got the positions. In his work as secretary of the Circle, young Jones began to get the vague feeling that something was wrong with the picture. Here were almost two hundred successful, influential business men joined in a club, which if its potential were realized, could have a great group influence for good in its community. Instead, they met, dined and patted each other on the back, counting it a good day when they exchanged profitable orders. In many other cities and in Chicago too, other groups of men were doing the same thing. Why, asked Melvin Jones, couldn't this selfish group power be directed to unselfish service in other areas of community life?

You're working yourself to death for somebody else without pay, his wife said, watching the business of the Circle encroach upon the time of the Jones Insurance Agency and its owner. Maybe I'm finding out that you don't get very far unless you start doing something for somebody else, and it wouldn't hurt some of these clubs like the Circle to get wise, replied her husband.

Pursuing his thought of group action in 1916, Melvin began to write letters to other clubs, feeling them out on the question of forming a national association. His insurance office became campaign headquarters. He and Mrs. Jones worked many nights on a flood of question-and-answer correspondence. Some of the replies were encouraging, many were of the *mind your own business and we'll mind ours* variety. But out of the welter of words came growing enthusiasm for a new idea in club service...and in that little office on those nights in 1916, the spirit of Lionism, if not the fact of it was born.

Finally, with a background of information and encouragement gleaned from correspondence, visits to other clubs and long conferences with associates, Melvin Jones broached the idea of affiliation with membership of the Business Circle. At the end of the year the Circle's directors approved the idea, leaving the mechanics of the plan up their secretary.

In June 1917, at the invitation of Jones, twenty delegates representing twenty-seven clubs from various parts of the United States met in the East Room of Chicago, Hotel LaSalle. Despite the wide range of interests and personalities involved, the meeting went smoothly and the consensus favored the formation of an association. Only when the name for the new group came up did the neck hairs begin to bristle.

Represented were Optimists, Reciprocity Clubs, the Wheels, the Concordia Club of Omaha, the Business and Professional Men of St. Paul, the Cirgonians of Los Angeles, the Vortex group from St. Louis and Detroit, and the Lions Clubs of Indiana ... and they were not about to become stepchildren without a struggle.

Melvin Jones had anticipated this, and had done some cloakroom campaigning, aided by members of the Business Circle, who were backing their secretary's favorite...the Lions. Melvin had done considerable research into legend, heraldry and zoology, and was convinced that the Lion stood for courage, strength, fidelity and vital action. On a secret ballot it was tentatively decided to call the new group the "Association of Lions Clubs," and after the Optimists walked out in a pessimistic huff, the meeting adjourned.

Certainly the nucleus of Lionism was born at this meeting, and the groundwork laid for an organization which was to become the largest and most effective fellowship of service-minded men in the history of the world. Much of the organization remained to be perfected at the first convention to be held in Dallas Texas on 8-9-10th October 1917, and at the second convention at St. Louis in August of 1918. No attempt is made here to record the details of the childhood of Lions International. The adoption of an emblem, the official colors, the Code of Ethics and Objects and a strong Constitution came later. But one fact stands out like a beacon light in the haze of history ... Melvin Jones was the Founder of Lions International, the parent of its plans and purposes, the guide to its great future. He had help from many outstanding men in the years of his leadership - men who must, because of their great number and scope of contribution, be nameless here.

In the words of Charles F. Kettering, *Nothing ever built arose to touch the skies unless some man dreamed that it should, some believed that it could, and some willed that it must.* Melvin Jones continued his insurance agency in Chicago until 1926, but long before that it was a sideline to his main business of Lionism. Once again Mrs. Jones worked with her husband and a few volunteer aids, to set up the mechanics of a new flourishing organization. The first balance sheet, presented to the St. Louis convention in 1918, showed a gain of twenty clubs since the Dallas meeting in 1917, for a total of forty-eight. It also showed that the Secretary-Treasurer, named Jones, had received \$200 in salary for eleven months of overtime labour.

In 1950, when Lion membership had passed the 400,000 mark, the International Board of Directors conferred upon Melvin Jones the title of Secretary-General of Lions International for life. In 1958 the Board changed his official title to Founder and Secretary-General. But perhaps his greatest thrill and reward came in 1953, when after thirty-two years in cramped quarters in Chicago's McCormick Building, he stood on the stage of the International convention and took part in the dedication of his Association's own magnificent building, on Michigan Avenue in Chicago. It is a living symbol of the world's largest service club organization, but more than that - a living monument to the Founder.

Many honors came to Melvin Jones in his lifetime. In 1939, the Cuban Government decorated him with the National Merit Order of Carlos Manuel de Cespedes, the most cherished of the civilian decorations. In 1945 he was awarded the Order of Merit and Honor of the Cuban Red Cross. In 1932 President Herbert Hoover of the United States named him to a select group of business executives, who attended a White House conference to discuss economic problems. In 1945

Melvin Jones attended a Washington conference for preliminary planning of the United Nations, and in April of that year he was in San Francisco representing Lions International, as a consultant at the historic organization of the United Nations.

Melvin Jones' office on the fourth floor of International Headquarters contains hundreds of testimonials to the regard in which he was held by many organizations, and by his fellow Lions. One of the most recent and most highly treasured is a scroll presented by then President Finis E. Davis on behalf of Lions International, on the occasion of Melvin's eighty-second birthday party given by the Chicago (Central) Lions Club. That evening the Chicago Central group, which had been the Business Circle when Melvin joined it in 1913, announced the establishment of a perpetual scholarship fund in his honor. Now that the Founder is gone, it has been proposed that his office at International Headquarters be maintained permanently, as a shrine and a memorial to his service in Lionism.

Tragedy came to Melvin Jones in 1954 when Rose Amanda, his wife and helpmate for forty-five happy years, passed away. In a letter written shortly after her death he pleaded:

Hurry, hurry, southern breeze, bring back spring, bring back summer. Bring back the flowers, the birds, my wife...the place I thought was mine is lifeless without them.

When loneliness seemed impossible to contain, a kindly Providence brought into his life a new companion ... a charming and cultured neighbor who had been helpful and solicitous in the void of Melvin's sorrow. On June 21st 1956 in a simple but impressive ceremony, Lillian M. Radigan became Mrs. Melvin Jones, and to the moment of his death she has been his constant companion, his shield against loneliness and despair, the guardian of his health and comfort.

Through her ministrations and solicitude the summer breeze brought back happiness to his garden, and insofar as human love could ward off the eternal darkness, she kept him active and happy in the service of his Lions brotherhood.

In November 1959, while in route to address an anniversary celebration of the Edmonton Canada, Lions Club he suffered the first of several slight strokes. Despite the attack, which would have put other eighty-year-olds to bed, Melvin donned his dinner clothes and acknowledged a standing ovation from a wheel chair.

His stubborn refusal to accept the infirmities of old age constantly amazed his associates at International Headquarters. He appeared regularly at his desk, commuting alone from his suburban home. He missed none of the important events on the hectic schedule of the 1960 International Convention, where cheers for the greatest Lion of them all frequently shook the rafters.

So when death came to Melvin Jones, it came not as an intruder, or the winner of a violent struggle, but as an invited guest. The sturdy frame and eager mind, which had inspired and guided a worldwide brotherhood of kindly men to the very pinnacle of world prestige and influence, finally became tired. As the darkness gathered, Melvin took the hand of his beloved wife Lillian, and found eternal peace. Melvin passed away at his home on June 1st 1961, at the age of eighty-two years.

The perfect attendance record of Lion Melvin Jones has been broken by death. He changed the whole concept of club membership with his insistence upon one simple phrase in the constitution of Lions International.

No club shall hold out as one of its objects financial benefits to its members.

His homely philosophy of life ... You can't get very far until you start doing something for somebody else ... has become the by word of devoted men of good will, doing something for the needy and the handicapped of the free world ... the miracle that was only a dream short yesterdays ago.

International President Fines E. Davis

International President Fines E. Davis at the time wrote. Once in every generation or era a man appears, and in his fleeting hour upon this stage leaves an indelible imprint upon the lives of his fellow men, and upon generations yet to come. Such a man was Melvin Jones. All over the world today he is the symbol of man's concern for his fellow man.

The poet said:

To live in hearts we leave behind is not to die.

In the hearts and memories of the men of Lionism, and in the hearts of countless human beings with restored courage and hope throughout the world, Melvin Jones is not dead.

.. but trifling steps ahead, and nearer to the end; so that you too, once past the bend, shall meet again this kindly friend you fancy dead.

He will live forever as the symbol of the great Association he founded, and through its program of unselfish service will multiply his influence for humanitarian service to the end of time.

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