

Remarks by DG Ken Leja – Feb. 2023

Melvin Jones Memorial Event, Jan. 21

Imagine a words-eye-view of the Arizona frontier of 1879 when Melvin Jones was born. That was one of several featured presentations at the Memorial celebration and rededication to Lionism event in Fort Thomas held January 21, 2023.

As a former Memorial board member and an amateur historian, I was privileged to speak at the “Living & Serving the Vision of Lions” event at the Memorial, an LCI shrine and destination memorial located near the site of Jones’ birth back when Arizona was the wild, wild West, a territorial frontier and the focal point of an ongoing battle between Indigenous peoples and invading settlers, homesteaders, ranchers, and range-ridin’ roughians.

As Lions we are all products of our times... the sum of the influencers and mentors, who shaped and molded the way we think, act, behave and participate in our world, whether we’re from Prescott, Phoenix, Nogales or Fort Thomas.

We share something in common with some notable people... namely, Brian Sheehan, Michael Jackson, Hillary Clinton, John F. Kennedy, Melvin Jones, and Vince Gill.

Politics aside, all had a vision for their time ...spoken during their time, and which was formed and presented because of “their time.”

Each, in their fleeting hour on the stage, has left an indelible imprint on our lives.... through their words, deeds and actions.. a permanent tattoo on the lives of others and upon generations yet to come.

“Together We Can” (Sheehan)...

“Take a look at yourself — the man in the mirror” (Jackson)...

“It takes a Village to Raise a Child” (Clinton)...

“Ask not what your country can do for you...” (Kennedy)...

“Start doing something for somebody else” (Jones)...

Let there be peace on earth and let it begin with me.” (Gill)

Each of these individuals started out in a family learning from their parents, being influenced by family; learning about life and social expectations based on where they were – AND based on which side of the tracks.

All were further influenced by teachers... by friends and acquaintances, both business and social. So have we!

We share a common connection of being the product of our heritage, education, and life experiences – the crock-pot result of home, family, friends and influences.

Along the way we were encouraged by others to make a difference, to get involved, to find our reward in personal satisfaction in service to others, and to get the job done...well.

We’re here at this event as Lions, but we didn’t start out as Lions, emboldened by our motto, “**We Serve.**” Rather, we became Lions by choice... as a way of making a difference in our small space of the world.

I think that’s what makes being here today... at this location celebrating the “Vision of Lions” ...at the birthplace of its founder Melvin Jones and site of his Memorial – this is special!

“Living and Serving the Vision of Lions” – it all started here. Simply stated, Melvin Jones was a product of his time... his home, heritage, education and life experiences.

Born near here on the family homestead, 1879, when —a stone’s throw from here — was Camp Thomas, a military post built to protect early settlers from the hostiles and rehabilitate the local savages during a most turbulent time in Arizona history.

This place was “ground zero” for the 40-year blood-bath of hostilities between the indigenous peoples making their last stand against the white man’s encroachment.

At its peak, Camp Thomas (Fort Thomas) protected about 300 settlers in the area — including the camp’s 145 inhabitants. For perspective, the most recent census (2020) identifies today’s Fort Thomas as having a population of 320. Not much has changed.

Imagine the angst of Lydia Gilbert Jones (Melvin's mother), a gentle woman from Kansas during those early years as she bore and nurtured her infant son under the constant threat of Indian raids.

She and her husband John Calvin Jones arrived in the area only a few months after the arrival of several thousand Yavapai Apache were force-marched to the Indian Agency at San Carlos — a forced "Exodus" that resulted in hundreds of deaths.

Relocated to a so-called "Apache stronghold" – as described in East Coast press as 'just up the road' — it's more correctly known as the San Carlos Apache Reservation... established by Washington politicians who knew little about the differences in tribal cultures, customs and language... and intended as a "one-size-fits-all" strategy to deal with the "Indian problem."

As such, tribal friends (and foes) were forced to live in close proximity to one another amid reckless oversight and military brutality, harsh conditions and negligent federal support. Simply stated, there was no peace on the Rez — a veritable penal colony with tribal "hoods".

During Melvin's first summer, Chiricahua Apache war chief Vittorio fled the San Carlos with warriors, raided the surrounding areas and joined with Mescalero Apache for skirmishes along the Butterfield Stage route and into New Mexico. No wonder Mom was worried.

Before Melvin's third birthday (1881), followers of an Apache medicine man (Nock-ay-det-Kline) led an attack on Fort Apache up north.

A short time later, another 700 Apache fled-the-Rez under the leadership of another Apache medicine man, Geronimo, who led an eight-year reign of terror throughout the Territory.

Such was the circumstances of Jones' early years... dirty, dusty, and dry... harsh conditions on the frontier... the wild, Wild West... on a farm near a military camp surrounded by a collection of stores, saloons and brothels that were called Clantonville, Camp Thomas, Maxey and Fort Thomas.

And yes, you heard right: Clantonville as in the Clanton's (of Tombstone's O.K. Corral fame). They roamed this same valley along with other range-ridin' roughians. In other words, this was not an area for the weak of heart nor faint of spirit.

Young Melvin was baptized into a world of violence, suffering and death. Survival meant working together, helping one another, and looking out for danger — whether from the elements or the inhabitants.

The 1967 article in ***Lions Magazine*** that chronicled Jones' youth states, "His boyhood memories were a MEH-Lange 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 glamor. Not Melvin."

It was the life-struggle on the frontier that provided him the grit and determination for moving forward, despite obstacles, danger, and harsh realities. In other words and despite his gentle demeanor and affability as an adult, he was a tough guy ...with a big heart.

The history of what happened next is well-documented. His mom and dad separated, she took Melvin Jones and his siblings back to the Midwest for better educational opportunities.

He learned of "you scratch my back, and I'll scratch yours" – the tenor or model within the Business Circle of Chicago — where Jones began his professional career. But he believed success in business carried a societal obligation and began to develop his "better vision."

In OUR world of "what's in it for me," we know there's something more. Across the globe, Melvin Jones remains the symbol of man's concern for his fellow man; the guiding spirit of a great movement for human welfare; the eternal inspiration for men (and women) of good will who find unselfish rewards in human service."

Lions began small, focused on helping others help themselves locally... their community, parish, county and region. Success has been exponential to where Lions are international in impact and service. We think globally, but act locally.

Today, we have clubs in Arizona sending supplies of food, clothing and medicine to war-torn Ukraine to support its displaced people; providing water and school supplies for children in Philippine villages;

providing glasses, vision surgeries and supplies on medical missions to Bangladesh;

and here in Arizona, doing vision screening of school children, feeding the homeless, and providing housing for the indigent in our communities.

We serve.

Today, we're here in Fort Thomas to celebrate the ***Vision of Lions***, honoring the man who founded this organization, and rededicating ourselves to his lofty vision of service for others.

Earlier, I mentioned some famous names. They have a combined message:

"You don't get very far unless you start doing something for somebody else..."

...so "Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country..."

...because "It takes a village to raise a child."

"Let it begin with me." Because only "Together ...we can."

We're Lions and We Serve.