

Toledo's Golden Rule Mayor

Samuel Milton Jones believed the Golden Rule, and not the 'Rule of Gold,' should govern men's lives.

By Elaine Whitfield Sharp

SAMUEL Milton Jones, one of Toledo's most controversial mayors, had a penchant for change and a vision that inspired hope in the city's jobless thousands during the national Depression of 1890s. That vision also sent shock waves through the city's crusty political elites.

The Welsh-born oil driller made his fortune in the oil fields of Pennsylvania and Lima, and first came to Toledo in 1894 to manufacture an oil-drilling device he'd invented. The streams of ragged men begging for work at the door of his factory, the Acme Sucker Rod Co., moved him to pity.

These conditions didn't square with the young idealist's concept of democracy and equality. The 1890's Depression put one out of every five men out of work and sent mortgage rates soaring and farm prices plunging. Major railroads - Union Pacific, Erie, Philadelphia and Reading, Northern Pacific - collapsed in bankruptcy.

Jones, a Christian who rejected the gospel of wealth in favor of the social gospel, envisioned cities and business not as traps for the working man, but as the new frontier on which to build economic and political democracy. This self-styled businessman who had left his parents' New York farm at 15 in search of work knew the discouragement of

the unemployed and underpaid and determined to do something about this for his employees at the Acme Sucker Rod Co., build near the corner of Segur and Field avenues.

For example, during the factory's organization, the foreman brought Jones a listing of area competitive wages.

"Put that way!" Jones cried. "What has that got to do with what we can afford to pay?" The going rate in the area was \$1 to \$1.25 daily. Jones paid \$1.50, increasing this to \$2 for those with one year's seniority. Women received equal pay and benefits.

All employees got one week's paid vacation after six months' work and put in 8-hour, not 12-hour days, as was the norm. Jones claimed that shorter work days produced, a better product, cut down on factory boredom, and reduced drinking problems.

Personal notes of encouragement from Jones came in the wage packets, along with an annual 5 per cent bonus as part of a profit-sharing plan. Sickness and accident insurance and subsidized hot meals from the Acme cafeteria were a few of the benefits which put Jones' employment policies decades ahead of their time.

No pedantic list of rules hung on Acme's employee notice board, just the condition that gave the employer his nickname "Golden Rule" Jones: Do unto others as you would do unto yourself.

It seems Jones would have treated himself pretty well, for as Acme prospered, he purchased land and created Golden Rule Park for the workers, furnishing it with benches and shade trees, a speaker's stand, a playground, and a bandstand where the Golden Rule Band, an employee ensemble could play on sunny days. Acme's working mothers were able to leave their children at the factory kindergarten or nursery school.

Acme, no doubt, was Jones' microcosm for an innovative social experiment. The city of Toledo was next.

When the Republican party nominated Jones for mayor in 1897, it may be that his basic philanthropic philosophy wasn't fully understood, although his successful business record and solid relationship with labor were well known.

It was hoped Jones could set the books straight in city hall and get the municipal wheels running smoothly and inexpensively.

From street corners Jones campaigned like a seasoned politician with the aid of the Golden Rule Band, singing songs he'd written himself.

The businessmen of Lincoln Club saw in Jones a symbol of industrial success; Central Labor Union members saw an advocate for the working man's cause, and the moral reformers bent on legislating behavior saw in him a member of the Westminster Presbyterian Church, a man who would close all the saloons and lean out the brothels once he got to city hall.

Although a relative newcomer to the city, Jones squeaked by his Democratic opponent with a margin of 518 votes out of 20,614 cast. From then on, a series of shocks began registering. Jones had his own agenda for reform, but it looked nothing like the agenda of either of the party machines that had dominated city politics for years.

Jones shunned the Republican party's nominee for city clerk and appointed his own darkhorse candidate. Party patronage at city hall was over, and Jones started employing people on the basis of what, and not who, they knew. City employees worked 8-hour days under Jones so that more people could work overall as part of his "Divide – up – the -Day" campaign.

This was only the tip of the reform iceberg. Taking bids for city projects was abolished because, Jones claimed, this process depressed wages by encouraging low offers. Instead, the jobless would be employed to fix the streets and make other repairs and the city's money would go directly back into the hands of the people. After all, cities existed for people, Jones said.

Kindergartens for working mothers' children, playgrounds and public baths, upgraded market facilities, and parks became part of the city's budget.

In Jones' eyes, all men were equal regardless of national origin or race – a rather liberal, avant-garde view for the day. So for Toledo's Golden Rule Mayor, it seemed natural to start working for some basic civil rights. What better place to start than the police court?

At the turn of the century, arresting people on slim suspicion and police

brutality were said to be common. The “riff raff” from the city’s gutters and shop doorways often ended up in the police court, and they were sent to the city workhouse if they couldn’t rustle up the cash for the fine.

Petty crime and drunkenness occurred because of individual frustration and low self image, Jones believed, and these wrongs could be best cured by granting persons the right to work in some way giving them back the humanness they had lost somewhere along the line.

No more police brutality would be tolerated, declared Jones, and police officers’ clubs were replaced with small, thin canes. Beatings in the city workhouse were to stop and human treatment was to be assured.

To promote this attitude toward the perpetrators of petty crime, Jones took full advantage of Toledo’s city charter allowing him to preside over the police court in the regular judge’s absence.

If the police court dehumanized people, then Jones set out to redeem them.

When a man stood before the bench accused of stealing a loaf of bread from a baker’s wagon, Jones fined himself \$1 and everyone else in the courtroom 10 cents for living in a city where a man had to steal or starve. A woman charged with prostitution was mildly rebuked by the mayor, who said simply: “Go, and sin no more.”

Jones, who abhorred violence and had a lively correspondence with Leo Tolstoy, a fellow pacifist, told a tramp accused of carrying a revolver to put it in a vise and smash it with a hammer right in front of

the bench. “This is a devilish weapon,” Jones lectured, “intended solely to kill human beings.”

But Golden Rule government wasn’t exactly what the party machines had in mind, and the moral reformers were indignant at the mayors “laxity” in the police court.

The Republican party declared war when it refused re-nominate Jones for mayor in 1899. Even the Democrats opposed him.

But the Golden Rule Mayor had built quite a following his first term, and some 13,000 Toledoans signed a nominating petition and pleaded with him to run as an independent. That suited Jones, who disliked party politics anyway since he saw it as an instrument of division that defeated democracy and cooperation. This was battle of idea, not parties, Jones believed.

The press and church also withdrew their support of Jones, who used to say that everyone was against him except the people. On the campaign trail, on street corners, in saloons and union halls, Jones spoke of “The Right to Work,” and “The Golden Rule Against the Rule of Gold.”

On the eve of the election on April 4, the Toledo Bee accused Jones of “fanning the flame of the class hatred,” despite the fact that even socialists of the day such as Eugene V. Debs alienated him because he refused to adhere to the Marxist analysis of class structures.

“Open your eyes, oh men of Toledo” wrote one Bee editor. “A great danger confronts you. The eyes of the nation

are Toledo, and as sure as there is a God, the election of Mayor Jones is a cruel blow at the material and spiritual well-being of Toledo.

The following day a chagrined Bee reported Jones' landslide victory – he had taken some 17,782 votes of 25,547 votes cast. For the first time, an independent shunned by the establishment had won the resounding vote of the people. With the help of only one newspaper, the German Express, this happened again in the 1901 and 1903 elections.

Jones believed this to be a mandate for change.

The people should profit from the city, Jones declared, and if the coal, steel and flour industries, plus gas, electric, and traction utilities were municipally owned, then everyone could profit.

It was at this juncture that Jones made his first widely unpopular move. In a city-wide referendum, Jones' proposal that the city own and operate its own artificial gas and electric light plants was soundly defeated. Too many citizens remembered the city's disastrous attempt to own and operate its own natural gas plant back in 1891, a cumbersome venture which never yielded a regular supply of gas and left the city with several partially filled wells and a long, costly pipeline.

This didn't deter Jones, who also attempted to give citizens a better lot on the tams. Ohio law prohibited city ownership of a streetcar system, so Jones concentrated on lower fares instead. When the traction company's franchise came up for renewal before common council, Jones vitriolically

attacked the outfit's huge profit record and demanded that fares be reduced.

The Republican council reduced fares by a token and renewed the franchise for 25 years, creating a public furor in the process.

Newspapers opposing traction interests urged the people to suppose Mayor Jones' anticipated veto of the measure and to "petition in boots" at the next meeting.

Some 400 people crammed into the council chambers, which generally held only 100, for a meeting on Sept. 8, 1903. A huge crowd gathered outside on the street. As Mayor Jones approached, the crowd fell silent and parted to let him pass.

Taking his seat at the council table, Jones minced no words, in lambasting the traction company and dramatically vetoed the franchise renewal bill.

The crowd went wild. Amidst the cheers of approval, a traction company lawyer turned to Jones and bitterly remarked: "I suppose that is the kind of government we may expect when the Golden Rule comes into force?"

"Mr. Smith," Jones said, "this is the kind of government we have when the Rule of Gold is in full force."

While Jones' success at municipal ownership was limited in Toledo, he took his message of economic democracy and self-determination across the nation as a member of the League of American Municipalities and other groups.

But in his private life, it seems the mammoth problems of human misery,

unemployment, and poverty often left the Golden Rule Mayor physically and spiritually exhausted. Never able to turn anyone in need away, his city-hall office became a relief bureau for Toledo's dispossessed and troubled, and Jones gave away his salary to many of them.

One cold winter day, three men came for money to buy themselves Salvation Army dinners. After they had gone with \$5, the only bill Jones had on his person, with instructions to return with the change, Jones' clerk interjected: "You'll never see that money again."

He was wrong. The men came back with the change.

However, not all of Jones' debts were repaid. On his death in July, 1904, Jones' son, Perry, discovered more than \$2,000 in loan notes stuffed in corners of the mayor's city-hall desk. From 1897 to 1904, Jones' personal fortune dwindled from \$900,000 to \$300,000, although the Acme Sucker Rod Co. prospered.

Jones donated vast sums of money to charity, even though nothing could replace the basic right to earn a living, he believed. Still, charity channeled money to the needy, and on one occasion Jones donated \$50,000 to a single project he considered worthwhile.

The Golden Rule Mayor knew that a well-fed man can't understand what it's like to be hungry, so he often fasted for five-day stretches, drinking only water to sustain himself. He even denied himself the luxury of underwear (Many poor people couldn't afford it so why should he have it?), and frequently slept out on his back porch in any kind of weather.

Perhaps the rigors of this life-style caused Jones, who was already susceptible to colds, to catch a severe one in July, 1904. An abscess on Jones' right lung burst, and on July 12 he died at the age of 61.

As he lay in Memorial Hall, some 55,000 people, rich, poor, Democrats and Republicans, filed past Jones' bier to pay their last respects to the Golden Rule Mayor who had become a friend, if at times a controversial one.

Jones, whose parents brought him to America from Ty Mawr, North Wales, in 1846 as a precocious 3-year-old, was on a quest for brotherhood. This quest, at a time when other men were searching for answers, cast him onto the accidental role of independent reformer.

Like a man climbing the winding staircase of a cathedral, Jones reached out for a rope, an answer, in the darkness – and was surprised to hear the clanging of a bell.