

LIFE IN THE KERRY PATCH

When Doc was born in 1904, St. Louis was on top of the world. It was a hundred years after the Louisiana Purchase, and the United States was celebrating in St. Louis with an Exposition designed to be even greater than Chicago's Columbian Exposition twelve years earlier. On April 30, 1904, the Louisiana Purchase Exposition (also called the 1904 World's Fair) officially opened. In the East Room of the White House, President Theodore Roosevelt spoke enthusiastically about the Fair. William Howard Taft stood in for the President in St. Louis to officially start the event. St. Louis held the world's attention for the next seven months. Forty-three foreign countries boasted displays in the Exhibition, and in the summer the third Olympic Games of the modern era were held at Washington University. St. Louis attracted the brightest and most prominent men and women of all fields. Helen Keller spoke at the Fair in October, and observed that "the Louisiana Purchase Exposition is a great manifestation of all the force of enlightenment and all of man's thousand torches burning together."ⁱ The World's Fair, the Olympics and a series of new ideas ranging from technology and science to the invention of the ice-cream cone, made St. Louis the place to be. The song "Meet Me in St. Louis" was first performed during the Fair, and would later gain popularity in the 1944 classic Judy Garland movie of the same name. At the heart of the Fair was the "Ivory City." It was as if an entirely new city had been created in St. Louis. Composed of twelve exhibition palaces which ranged in size from 4.1 to 18.4 acres, each palace hosted a field of interest such as Machinery, Electricity, Education, and Transportation. To many St. Louisans, the Fair epitomized everything St. Louis could have hoped for. It was "the year St. Louis enchanted the world,"ⁱⁱ and as historian Stephen Raiche wrote, "for seven months in

1904, St. Louis was the most cosmopolitan city on earth.” Henry Adams, in *The Education of Henry Adams*, saw the St. Louis Exposition as mechanical power’s “first creation in the twentieth century, and for that reason, acutely interesting.” Upon arriving, Adams saw this creation firsthand:

The world has never witnessed so marvelous a phantasm: by night Arabia’s crimson sands had never returned a glow half so astonishing, as one wandered among long lines of white palaces, exquisitely lighted by thousands on thousands of electric candles, soft rich shadowy, palpable in their sensuous depths.ⁱⁱⁱ

For Doc Lawler, the city of St. Louis was not so marvelous. Unlike Henry Adams, whose St. Louis experience involved wandering through exquisitely lit buildings, Doc’s St. Louis experience started in poverty. On July 16, 1904 Doc was born not into the soft and shadowy Ivory City, but the hard and dirty Kerry Patch. The Kerry Patch seemed to be everything the Ivory City was not.

When Doc was born, the Kerry Patch was what it had always been: very poor, very rough and very Irish. Just eight miles northeast of the World’s Fair grounds, the Kerry Patch sat on the city’s near north side. St. Louis had been home to some Irish immigrants since the early nineteenth century, but it wasn’t until the Potato Famine era in Ireland, from 1840-1860, that the Kerry Patch evolved. From 1840-1860, almost two million Irish immigrants came to the United States. The majority of those who arrived in St. Louis found themselves near poverty, homeless and unwelcomed by the city around them. The neighborhood soon became known as the Kerry Patch. The legend held that “the immigrants had come from County Kerry in Ireland,”^{iv} but wherever the new Irish had actually come from, they did not receive a warm welcome in St. Louis. The Irish who settled Kerry Patch in the early 1840’s built “irregular and poorly constructed homes” and were derogatorily referred to as “Shanty Irish.” Etan Diamond, of the Missouri

Historical Society, writes that “few outsiders ventured into the strange land of Kerry Patch and few insiders would have wanted them there.”^v The city of St. Louis wanted nothing to do with them. A city guide book published in 1878 described the residents of Kerry Patch as “poor, but independent” folk whose “chief amusements consist of punching each other’s eyes.” The Irish in the Kerry Patch, continued the guide, lived a “wretched existence within ... miserable abodes.”

Doc’s “miserable abode” stood near the corner of 12th and Cass. There, he shared a one bedroom house with his parents and two older sisters. The family all slept in one room, and money was always tight. Doc’s father, who worked as a boilermaker, died in 1915 and his absence put pressure on Doc and his mother Nana to provide for the family. Nana worked nights downtown as a scrubwoman in office buildings, and Doc started to take on a variety of odd jobs. One of his earliest positions involved selling fruits and vegetables from his Uncle Jim’s produce stand. But before Doc started working, he did what all boys in the Kerry Patch did: join a boys’ gang. It was in the gang that Doc first learned the value of being loyal to friends and the importance of defending territory.

Every section of Kerry Patch had its own boys’ gang. Gangs such as “Egan’s Rats,” the “Hogan Gang” and the “Green Ones” roamed the streets, each protecting its own turf. Monsignor Joseph O’Toole, who lived in Kerry Patch at the time, recalled that fights between the gangs “often erupted after enemy gang members trespassed on the sacred home territory.”^{vi} When the gangs fought each other, they used fists and threw bricks. In an atmosphere like this, it wouldn’t have taken Doc long to realize that having friends at your side was necessary for survival.

Violence among older members of the community was also a problem, and the Kerry Patch often had to deal with mob riots. The residents of Kerry Patch earned such a reputation for fighting that the St. Louis Police Department nicknamed the area the “Bloody Third District.” Police and Kerry Patch residents were regularly at odds, and often “a policeman could do nothing to stop a fight, but shed his coat, roll up his sleeves and join the brawl himself.”^{vii} For boys like Doc in Kerry Patch, protection was not found from the police, but within the brotherhood of the gang. You didn’t trust the police to settle your differences – you trusted your friends, their fists and your own.

Because of his gang involvement, and because of community perceptions about the Kerry Patch, Doc began to earn a reputation as a potential trouble maker. When he went to weekend dances at Northside Turner Hall, for instance, he was known for being both a good dancer and a shady character. Sometimes Doc and his friends had to leave the dances early in order to avoid the police. One weekend in 1922, on a night when Doc again had to leave early to escape police detection, he met sixteen-year-old Elizabeth Canon and her sister Ann. Doc was attending the dance with his friend Cotton, and the two young men invited the Canon sisters to meet them later. Undeterred by strong advice from friends to avoid these two troublemakers, Elizabeth and Ann agreed to meet the boys after the dance was over. We don’t know for sure what kind of first impression Doc made that night on Elizabeth, but the wiry boy with the derby hat must have said something right. Within a year, Doc and Elizabeth (known as “Babe”) were in love and thinking of marriage.

When Doc and Babe agreed to get married, they had to do so out of the public eye because Doc was still in trouble with the police. Doc was friendly with the Justice of the

Peace in a part of St. Louis county called Wellston, and on the night of April 29, 1923, Doc and Elizabeth drove to Wellston to marry. When Doc found the Justice, he was involved in a poker game and uninterested in Doc's request. But Doc wanted to get the marriage taken care of because he knew the police might step up their search for him. To coax the Justice into performing the marriage, Doc paid for the Justice's poker hand. This drew the Justice away from the gaming table, and Doc married Elizabeth Canon. In the Kerry Patch, Doc had always fought for or made deals to get what he wanted. It made sense that he would have to negotiate even for his marriage license.

In the next year, 1924, Doc celebrated his twentieth birthday and the city of St. Louis marked the twentieth anniversary of the 1904 World's Fair. It had been twenty years in Kerry Patch for Doc. For the city of St. Louis, it had been twenty years of major change. St. Louis historian James Neal Primm follows a glowing section on the World's Fair with a chapter entitled "The Decline of the Inner City."^{viii} While the city didn't fold completely, St. Louis had lost much of its 1904 glamour. Doc's future detractors might find it fitting that Doc was born in the golden year of 1904. Doc's critics longed for the Ivory City and its glorious palaces, and in Doc they saw nothing but the Kerry Patch. In many ways they were right.

Even though the physical space of the Kerry Patch, the blocks of all-Irish homes, began to disappear after World War I ended in 1918, the Kerry Patch mentality lived on in men like Doc Lawler. Just as he had faced other street gangs as a boy with loyalty and a willingness to fight, so he would later face anyone who wanted to cause trouble in his territory. Much of Doc's public life can be linked to this basic fact: He was a man from the Kerry Patch.

Jerome Shen was not a man from the Kerry Patch. That Jerome could not even have fathomed growing up as Doc did leads to the most obvious observation we can make about Doc and Jerome: though they shared common traits, lived in the same city and practiced the same religion, and had children who would eventually marry each other, they led extremely different lives. The differences between Doc and Jerome are most obvious in each man's early life. We know that Doc Lawler came from the Kerry Patch. After we find out where Jerome Shen came from, it will seem amazing that Doc and Jerome could ever have any connection whatsoever with each other.

LIFE IN SHANGHAI

To unearth Jerome Shen's roots, we have to move over seven thousand miles away and to a different continent. Born on August 5, 1918 in Shanghai, China, Jerome entered a world that felt a lot like the Ivory City. At the time Jerome was born, historian Harriet Sergeant writes that Shanghai "possessed a distinctly medieval feel."^{ix} Within that system, the Shens lived like royalty.

On twenty-four acres of Shanghai estate, the Shen family held three separate houses. One was for Jerome's parents, John and Agnes; one was for Jerome's uncle; and the third for the parents of Jerome's father. Each house was richly decorated, and in each, servants were available for nearly any task. Reflecting back on his spoiled childhood, Jerome soon recognized that his father was "loaded." The Shen complex had ample green space and courtyards, and much like a royal estate, the most important part of the grounds was a great hallway in the main house. This hallway, which could seat up to five hundred

people for sit-down dinners, was used not only for hosting parties, but also as a gymnasium and skating rink. When the doors at one end of the hall were opened, the family chapel became visible. That the Shens had their own chapel emphasizes the important role religion played even in Jerome's early life.

Even though the number of Catholics in China was relatively small at the end of the nineteenth century, Catholicism was central to Shen family life. Although religious freedoms in China would later change, at this time the Shen family was allowed to openly practice Catholicism. Jerome's parents had taken their Christian names, John and Agnes, at an early age, and by the time Jerome was growing up in the 1920's, the Catholic faith was well established as the family's religion. It was virtually impossible for Jerome not to be heavily influenced by Catholicism. Jerome's father John had actually made a very serious attempt to be a Jesuit priest. He lived as a seminarian for eleven years, through grade school and high school, intent on becoming ordained. He failed the exams required to enter the Jesuits, however, and went on to start his own family. (It is interesting to consider that had the Jesuits only been little more lax in their acceptance standards, John Shen would have become a priest and Jerome Shen would never have been born.) Jerome's uncle was Pastor at the local Catholic parish, and the Shen family regularly interacted with a large number of Jesuit priests, and nuns from the Society of Helpers and the Little Sisters of the Poor. A first answer to our question, then, is to say that Jerome came from a wealthy home that was heavily influenced by Catholicism. But to truly find out where Jerome came from we must take a close look at his mother. Today Jerome remarks that the most important event in his life was the encouragement of his mother. If we think about Jerome's situation, we can see why this would be true. For unlike Doc

Lawler, whose link to the Kerry Patch remained throughout his life, Jerome would later uproot himself from Shanghai and start from scratch in America. But though Jerome had to leave the Shen estate and wealth behind, he could always hold onto his mother's spirit.

Growing up, Jerome felt his family was "mother dominated." This would come as no surprise to anyone who knew Agnes Shen. Agnes had grown up under the arm of a step-mother who resented her. Her real mother had been diagnosed as mentally disturbed, and was locked away in a place where she could not receive visitors. Agnes was very bright, but as a daughter in a rich Chinese family, was not expected to go outside her home for school. Most girls of her social standing received their education at home. Agnes was lucky, however, in the establishment of a new, nearby missionary school during her youth. She became a part of the school's first-ever class, and was exposed to new possibilities for Chinese women. While Chinese tradition still dominated, new western, liberal ideas were starting to make societal inroads. At school Agnes met a number of strong-minded young women like herself, and she saw some of her classmates start the Women's Commercial and Savings Bank at 392 Nanking Road.^x

Agnes' exposure to western ideas and her dominance in Shen family life served as the catalyst for Jerome's eventual move to the United States. Had Jerome been guided only by his father, he probably would not have left Shanghai. Jerome's father, a very conservative businessman, was not excited about the possibility of his son leaving to practice medicine in the United States. Though he had become a part of the western economic market through overseas trading, Jerome's father held on to a number of older Chinese beliefs and many traditional medicinal understandings. When Jerome contracted dyptheria, for instance, his father thought he had swallowed turtle ashes. Despite his

reservations about his wife's desire for their son to study and practice medicine in the United States, John Shen didn't prevent Agnes from pushing Jerome in that direction. When asked later about what his dad thought about him becoming a doctor, Jerome answered "he didn't think." It wasn't so much that John Shen didn't think – it was more that he didn't bother to voice his thoughts. He knew that his wife's voice was the one that counted.

Agnes was firm in her belief that Jerome should leave Shanghai and travel to America. She saw a number of opportunities in the United States, and Jerome began to see these too once he entered college in 1939 at St. John's University in Shanghai. Even though the Shen family was wealthy, Agnes was so concerned that Jerome make it to the U.S. that while he was in college, she began to stash away money that would one day pay for Jerome's travel expenses. She wanted to make sure there were no excuses when the time came for him to go. When the time came in 1946, after Jerome had gained his B.A. and M.D. degrees from St. John's, Jerome's father learned about the money Agnes had been saving. On October 24, 1946, John told his wife that she didn't have to worry about the money. On that very same day, Agnes Shen suffered a stroke and passed away. There had been a party scheduled that night in the Shen hall, but instead of coming together to celebrate, relatives and friends gathered to mourn. It was ironic that Agnes died just before Jerome left for the United States. But in another sense, it was also fitting that with Agnes' death came Jerome's new life in the United States. When Jerome arrived in St. Louis in January 1947, he came from a wealthy Catholic home in Shanghai China. But more importantly, he came from the home of Agnes Shen.

Is it possible that Jerome, growing up in extraordinary wealth, and Doc, spending his youth in poverty, could share anything other than their Catholic faith in common? Surprisingly, the answer is not only yes, but yes in a very substantial way. Despite their radically different backgrounds, both Doc and Jerome learned the importance of loyal friendships. In Mother Teresa, Jerome Shen would find a woman whose strength and conviction was similar to that of his own mother Agnes. With Larry Callanan, Doc formed a relationship that started in the Kerry Patch, and, though tested, could not be broken.

ⁱ Primm, James Neal. *Lion of the Valley: St. Louis, Missouri*. Boulder, CO: Pruett Publishing Co., 1990. 417.

ⁱⁱ Leighton, C.R. *Harpers* 1960. As used in Primm, 418.

ⁱⁱⁱ Adams, Henry. *The Education of Henry Adams*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1973. 466-467.

^{iv} Diamond, Etan. "Kerry Patch: Irish Immigrant Life in St. Louis." *Gateway Heritage*. Missouri Historical Society: Fall 1989, 26.

^v Diamond, 27.

^{vi} Diamond, 28.

^{vii} Diamond, 27.

^{viii} Primm, 419.

^{ix} Sergeant, Harriet. *Shanghai*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1991. 218.

^x Sergeant, 271.