

12. The Dennis Brothers: Zibe and Jack

By

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On February 12, 1930, a few months before his 25th birthday, Uncle Zibe Dennis had another escape from catastrophe. He and Carl Quisenberry were in a Head's Bakery truck that was en route from Central City to Greenville, KY when a passenger train struck and completely demolished it. (1) The impact carried them about 200 feet before the train could be stopped. They escaped with cuts, bruises, and shock, but no broken bones.

There is another episode in Uncle Zibe's life that I have not been able to verify. According to my mother, Uncle Zibe was married at some point to Loy McCoy. The marriage lasted only a very short time, perhaps as little as one month. The picture below shows from left to right Zibe's second wife, Daphnia Ralph, Loy, and peeking around the corner of the Gish mausoleum in Fairmount Cemetery, my mother.



Daphnia Ralph, Loy McCoy, and Nell Bolton

Loy McCoy, born in 1910, was five years younger than Zibe Dennis, and she must have been quite young when they were married. Her father and mother, James McCoy and Rosanna (Swift) McCoy were living in Bremen, Muhlenberg County, KY in 1920, but Loy is found in the 1930 US Census in Louisville, KY and is listed as single. On October 29, 1931, she married Robert Davenport, who was born in Ohio County, KY. Uncle Zibe married Aunt Daph in April 1935.

Like Mammy Dennis's brother, his namesake, Uncle Zibe Dennis was apparently fond of foxhunting. An October 1, 1944 story in the Owensboro *Messenger-Inquirer* describing an upcoming field trial of the Southern Kentucky Foxhunters Association notes that Zibe Dennis was a member of the trophy committee. (2) Uncle Zibe also made the local news as part of a series of stories that appeared when he worked as a butcher in his brother's meat market in Central City.

In the early 1950s, there was a lot of turmoil in Central City because of efforts by the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) to unionize the area. The union recruitment activities were not confined to miners and others involved in the extensive coal mining industry in Muhlenberg County. Employees in local stores were pressured to join, and the intimidation at times got very intense. That may have started as early as March 1951 with the murder of J. L. Mauk, Sr., a local grocer. A second grocer, Bruce Young, also received a letter threatening his life, and Uncle Jack got a mysterious late-night call that made the news. (3) The man who called, Kemp O'Bannon, claimed he wanted to get money from Uncle Jack to buy sugar (or to obtain the sugar directly from him). He told the judge at his hearing that he intended to go into the whisky-making business, but Uncle Jack stated that he did not know O'Bannon and had never done business with him.

The sugar matter was dropped, but about a year later a more serious incident occurred during a labor demonstration, as a May 4, 1952 newspaper headline blared, "Truck Driver is Held After Car Strikes Picket." While the facts of the incident were initially disputed, the seriousness of it can be judged by the charge "assault with a deadly weapon with intent to kill" that resulted in the arrest of Golden Shown. (4) The setting of the incident was the front of Jack Dennis' Market, which I believe at the time may have been located at the end of Broad Street. The business had a parking lot, but the entrance to it was blocked by a union picket. One man claimed Uncle Jack urged Shown to drive on in even if he had to drive over the picket. Uncle Jack promptly filed an injunction to prevent further disturbances at his place of business.

Hearings were held to determine whether the injunction should be granted, and the fourth and final one took place in Greenville on May 22, 1952. At that hearing, a picture was produced of a crowd gathered around the Ben Franklin store, and the charge was made that the union had beaten the owner of the store, W. R. "Jack" Whitford. The story continued, "Zibe Dennis, who is butcher at the Dennis Meat Market, denied he had ever considered joining District 50." This had been alleged by a field representative of the UMWA's District 50 union. Uncle Zibe acknowledged that he had attended a union meeting, had taken some cards, and gave them to the Dennis Market employees, but stated that he himself had no intention of joining the union. The story also reveals that another Dennis Market employee was being pressured to join the union, and a dairy truck driver testified that he had been threatened because he attempted to cross the picket line at Dennis Market. (5)

When all testimony was finally heard, the judge ruled in favor of Uncle Jack, and the union was permanently prohibited from picketing his business. In issuing his final ruling, Judge A. J. Bratcher stressed that only about 500 of the total 4,000 population of Central City were union members. He wrote that the other 3,500 people ". . . have the right to enjoy all the privileges of citizenship, the right to be secure in their homes and the surrounding environments. They have the right to peace and the far greater right to feel that right is secure and unchallenged." (6) The impact of the ruling was resounding, and soon more than a dozen other businesses in Central City obtained injunctions against the union, a story told as far away as Cincinnati. (7)

After reading all the background material associated with the union troubles in Central City, I could not help but think that the brutal beating of Uncle Zibe described in an earlier chapter might have been connected to this story. I'm not sure when that happened to Uncle Zibe.



Jack Dennis



Jack Dennis



Jack Dennis



Zibe Dennis

In a calmer time, it was interesting to read in the South Carrolton personals section of the November 6, 1947 Owensboro paper that "Mr. and Mrs. Jack Dennis were in Owensboro Tuesday." That was it! Not a hint of why they were there or how long they stayed. Just the fact that they went 30 miles from home.



Jack and Elizabeth Dennis



Jack and Elizabeth Dennis
at their 50th wedding celebration



The Dennis Siblings in Later Life: Jack, Juanita (Seabay), and Zibe

Aunt Seabay was at the golden wedding anniversary celebration of Aunt Elizabeth and Uncle Jack, and she copied a poem that was apparently read during the formal part of the program. I'll share it with you, but I don't know the author.

Fifty Golden Years

Fifty autumns have come and gone
Since that autumn so long ago
You started down life's pathway together,
Your hearts as light as the autumn's glow.

Oh, you were so young then and carefree,
With a future before you as gay.
And that first little home you had, friends,
I fancy I can see it today.

How quickly the years have sped along,
And the babes you held on your knee
Have grown to manhood and womanhood.
So many great changes you see.

Your steps are not so light and springy
As they were in the springtime of life,
And your hair is not the same color
As when you were first man and wife.

There have been days of sorrow and sadness.
Yes, there've been days that seemed so long.
Then, too, there've been times of rejoicing,
When life went along like a song.

There are not many fond husbands and wives
Who together have journeyed so long.
For oft one is taken up yonder,
And the other is here all alone.

So, we thank our kind heavenly father,
Who has blessed you and let you both stay
Until with your children and kinfolks
You are keeping this wonderful day.

I was one of the babes that Uncle Jack held on his knee when I stayed with them at their home in South Carrollton, KY while Mom was in Florida. Mother always carried in her purse a note written by Uncle Jack that he gave her when Mom took me back to Grandad Dennis's farm. It reads, "Be good to this little boy. Uncle Jack."

One of the days of sorrow in the lives of Uncle Jack and Aunt Elizabeth, as well as all members of our family, was when they lost their 3-year-old grandson, Johnny Mike Dennis, son of Jackie Dennis and his first wife, Joyce Kelm. (8) Johnny Mike was staying with Joyce's parents in Central City when his grandmother found him hanging in a loop on the back porch that Mrs. Kelm used to hang her mop out to dry.

Just 3 months later, another such tragedy befell our family, when Aunt Marg Grace's 2-year-old daughter, Virginia, was killed by a neighbor when he backed out of his driveway. (9) I was at Aunt Marg's house when this happened, and I vividly remember the shrieks of my cousin, Lana Grace, who dashed through the door and pushed me aside, leaving blood on my shirt. Our grief at the time was magnified by both Johnny Mike's death and an occurrence from two years before. Incredibly, Aunt Marg's 1 1/2-year-old son, Bobby, was killed in a similar car accident by the neighbor on the other side of their house. (10)

Let's end this chapter on a lighter note with a story that Aunt Elizabeth told about someone mentioned earlier in the chapter, Golden Shown. She and Uncle Jack went to dinner with the Showns at a good restaurant one evening, and at one point, Golden's wife, Blanche, reached into her purse and pulled out a hundred-dollar bill. Turning to her husband, she said, "Golden, give me a new hundred-dollar bill. This one is all dirty!" Back in the day a hundred dollars was a lot of money to be carrying around in your pocket.

NOTES

This installment of the Wiggins-Bolton Family stories was informed largely by newspaper accounts from newspapers.com and genealogybank.com. It is amazing that we live in a time when we can sit at home and discover facts about our ancestors just by searching the Internet.

1. "I. C. Train Hits Bakery Truck." *Owensboro Messenger-Inquirer*, February 12, 1930, p. 1.
2. *Owensboro Messenger-Inquirer* October 1, 1944, p. 18.
3. "Mystery of Call Ended." *Owensboro Messenger* March 6, 1951, p. 5.
4. "Truck Driver Is Held After Car Strikes Picket." *Owensboro Messenger-Inquirer* May 4, 1952, p. 10. Golden Shown's last name rhymes with "clown," not with the past participle of show.
5. "Central City Merchants Tell of Labor Violence at Hearing." *Owensboro Messenger-Inquirer* May 22, 1952, p. 18.
6. "Picketing of Central City Market Is Held Unlawful: Synopsis of Opinion by Bratcher." *Owensboro Messenger-Inquirer* June 11, 1952, p. 1.
7. "Halt Picketing, Union is Told in Central City." *The Cincinnati Enquirer* July 9, 1952, p. 1.
8. "Muhlenberg Child Accidentally Hangs Self While at Play." *Owensboro Messenger-Inquirer* May 6, 1955, p. 12.
9. "Sympathetic Neighbors Try to Ease Grief of Tragedy-Stricken Family." *Charlestown Courier*, August 11, 1955, p. 1.
10. "Injuries Fatal to Boy Struck in Driveway." *Charlestown Courier*, July 30, 1953, p. 1.

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