

A TALE OF LOVING TRIBUTE: JAKE SWOGGER AND THE WATER BABIES

As sweat runs down your face, you close your eyes and imagine a dive into cool water. A refreshing dip in the pool offers blessed relief from the summer heat.

At one time in the Three Towns (West Brownsville, Brownsville, and Bridgeport), it was not a swimming pool that attracted overheated residents. It was the Monongahela River. In the early part of this century, many who plunged into the murky waters of the Mon had been taught to swim by one of the true “characters” from Brownsville’s past – a gruff retired riverboat captain named Jake Swogger.

In the years from around 1914 into the late 1930s, Jake taught hundreds of kids to swim. He called his students the “Water Babies,” and he conducted his classes along the riverbank near Bridgeport mine patch (“Frick patch”), then called Newtown.

Jake also ran a Sunday School in Newtown for many years. As I researched Jake’s story preparatory to writing this column, I was curious to learn why this retired veteran of the rivers became a Sunday School teacher and volunteer swimming instructor. What I discovered was the poignant story of a special bond between a father and his only daughter, who inspired him to spend the rest of his life teaching children about Christ and the rudiments of staying afloat.

To understand Jake you must know the story of his daughter Maizie, a delightful dynamo who became known as “The Little Superintendent.” Maizie’s fame resulted from the 1914 publication of a small book by that title, written by Elsie W. Jordan. I am indebted to Donald Swogger of Hiller for bringing it to my attention. I have read Maizie’s story. Now I understand why Jake devoted so much of his life to the children of Newtown.

Jake Swogger was born in the city of Allegheny (now known as Pittsburgh’s North Side) around 1863. Little is known of his youth, but while still a boy he lived near Albany, just north of Brownsville. The late Dr. H. D. Wilkins of California, an expert on steamboats built in this

area, talked with Jake when he was an adult. Jake told him of a childhood encounter with the river.

On January 13, 1877, during the ice breakup on the Monongahela River, a steamboat named the *Chieftan* was torn away from its moorings at Brownsville and was swept down the icy river. The powerless boat grounded at Albany.

Jake was about fourteen at that time. He and other boys managed to get onto the stranded vessel. They hoped to tie her up, but finding no ropes aboard, they got off. Before help could arrive, the boat floated off and went on down the river. It struck several tipples and finally sank near Lock 4 at North Charleroi. For Jake, it was an early exposure to the power of the river.

When Jake grew up, he became a riverboat pilot. His grandson, Donald Swogger of Hiller, recalls that Jake's pilot's license authorized him to navigate all of the rivers whose waters emptied into the Mississippi River as well as the Red River of the North. The details of those years of Jake's life are as obscure as the depths of the rivers he navigated, but when he was in his thirties or forties, he gave up the riverboats and came to South Brownsville. There he became a carpenter and a constable and, according to Don Swogger, helped to build Newtown ("Frick patch") for the H. C. Frick Company.

On October 19, 1896, Jake's only daughter was born. Her name was Maizie Merial Swogger. According to Elsie Jordan's book, Maizie's mother deserted her when she was very small. Nevertheless, Maizie was an outstanding student in the South Brownsville schools, and Jake did his best to raise her in a Christian way. Since there was no Sunday School in Newtown, Maizie walked to the First Christian Church in South Brownsville.

The inspirational saga of Maizie Swogger began on a Sunday evening in Newtown in the fall of 1908. Twelve-year-old Maizie and her father were sitting on the porch of her brother's house, singing hymns together. At the turn of the century, Newtown was home to many immigrant workers employed by H. C. Frick Company. Most could not speak English. As Maizie and her father watched the immigrant children play, Maizie said, "Papa, these children ought to be in Sunday School."

Her father agreed. Maizie jumped up, gathered ten or twelve children around her, and began teaching them about the Bible. Even though many could not understand her, she kept up her missionary work each day. She would gather the children in a field near Newtown and tell them Bible stories. In the winter, having no church building, Maizie would go from house to house teaching about the Gospel and visiting the sick. Elsie Jordan wrote that whenever she was seen on the street, "it

was with a crowd of little foreign children clinging to her, and because of her sweet motherly ways, some of the foreign women named her ‘The Little Mother.’”

Maizie did this for two years. Then she asked nearby churches to come to her aid and provide a place of worship for Newtown, but her pleas were in vain. When William Hood, Superintendent of the H. C. Frick Company at Brownsville, heard of fourteen-year-old Maizie and her work, he offered her the use of an abandoned one-room “First Aid” house owned by the company.

Seats were procured and the Newtown Union Christian Mission Sunday School was born. It met every Sunday afternoon. Over one hundred children attended in two shifts, because the twelve-by-twenty-foot room could not hold everyone at once. Maizie and her father Jake asked some of the older girls to help teach the classes. Maizie, age fourteen, was the Superintendent of the Sunday School.

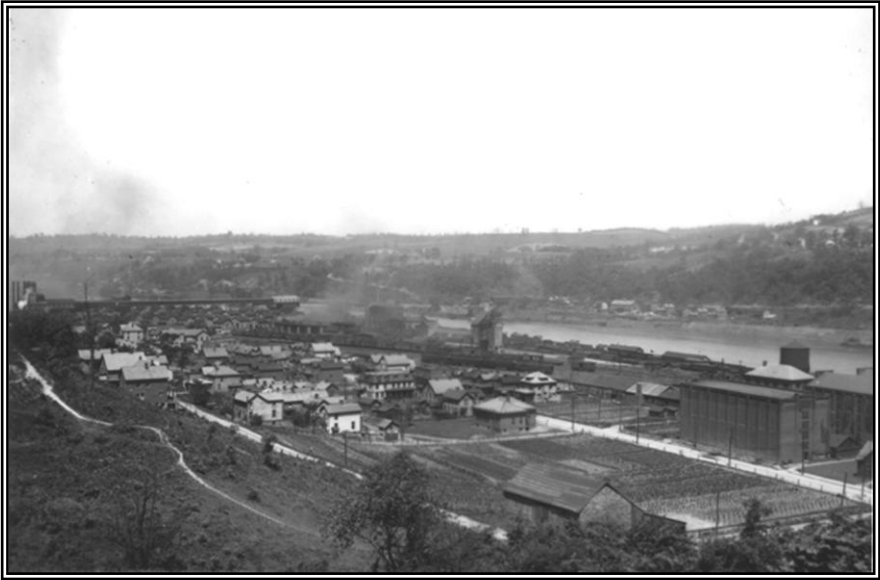
Seven girls whose ages ranged from eleven to fourteen became the teachers. These seven would attend Sunday School in the morning as students at the First Christian Church in South Brownsville, then teach what they had learned to their pupils in Newtown on Sunday afternoon. It was a Sunday School begun by a child, attended by children, and taught by children. The only adult in the entire Sunday School was Jake Swogger.

Yet despite her amazing accomplishment, Maizie felt she lacked something. And so it was that on November 24, 1912, the Rev. E. I. McKeever of the Baptist Church baptized Maizie through immersion, possibly in the Monongahela River. In the weeks that followed, Maizie planned the Sunday School’s annual Christmas festivities, which all of the children and their families eagerly anticipated.

But it was not to be. Not for Maizie.

In mid-December, she became ill. As she realized her condition, Maizie asked Jake to promise her that he would see that the children’s Christmas celebration was carried out as planned. Jake, whose heart was breaking, gladly granted her request. Maizie then turned to her good friend, Leona McGary, who was her own age and a teacher in the Sunday School. Maizie appointed her Superintendent, urging her to continue the work that she had started. On Christmas Eve, one month after her baptism, sixteen-year-old Maizie Swogger died of pneumonia.

The community of Newtown was stunned. They mourned the little missionary whom they had grown to love. They rallied around Leona McGary as she attempted, with Jake’s help, to carry out Maizie’s last wishes. On the day after Christmas, Maizie was laid to rest in Bridgeport Cemetery. Everyone in Newtown came to pay their respects. Flowers



The people of Bridgeport, and particularly of Newtown (Frick Patch, in the distance), mourned the death of the "Little Superintendent."

arrived from all over the country from those who had learned, through church publications and daily newspapers, the inspirational story of the littlest superintendent.

Miss Etta DeLaney, who was Maizie's last teacher in public school, characterized Maizie's life as one she spent "doing, each day that went by, some little good. Not dreaming of great things to be done by and by." To carry on Maizie's work with the immigrant children of Newtown, Jake helped with religious instruction on Sunday, and during the week in warm weather, he gave swimming lessons to the children. He called his pupils the "Water Babies," and the swimming activities enabled Jake to exert a steady Christian influence on the lives of the children.

It was Jake's way of keeping Maizie's work alive. By 1914, the Sunday School had grown to include over two hundred children. In a poignant letter, Jake composed this tribute to his beloved daughter.

"Her earnest work was like a great mountain of strength to me," he wrote. "She was a ray of sunshine that could be seen a long way off, and by looking upon it the darkest clouds of despair would quickly vanish."

There are people in our community today who remember Jake Swogger and the Water Babies. For over twenty years, countless children

became Water Babies and learned to swim. They were beneficiaries of the ongoing fulfillment of a promise made by a devoted father to his dying daughter.

It has been well over sixty years since Jake taught his last group of swimming pupils, but there are Water Babies who are still with us and have colorful memories of the gentle old man who taught them to swim. Next, the Water Babies will tell you their story.

SWIMMING CLASSES, SUNDAY SCHOOL KEPT DAUGHTER'S DREAM ALIVE

Previously we learned that in 1912, Newtown (Frick patch) was shaken by the death of sixteen-year-old Maizie Swogger. Maizie had singlehandedly founded the town's first Sunday School and served as its youthful superintendent. Maizie's father, a retired riverboat captain named Jake Swogger, had helped Maizie with the Sunday School.

As fulfillment of his promise to keep Maizie's work with the children of Newtown alive, Jake gave the Sunday School students swimming lessons in the Monongahela River. He called his students the "Water Babies," and over the next two decades, he taught hundreds of children from Newtown and the surrounding area to swim in the Monongahela River. Some of his Water Babies, who are now in their late sixties and older, still fondly remember their mentor, Jake Swogger.

Jake was of medium height, a gruff but gentle natured man who sported a bushy mustache. He was soft spoken, employing a megaphone to offer instructions to those in the water.

"I never heard him raise his voice," said Helen Shallenberger, eighty-six, who lives in South Brownsville and is one of several former Water Babies with whom I have spoken.

Jake began teaching the swimming classes at around the time of Maizie's death in 1912. It is certain that by 1914, the year of publication of the book "The Little Superintendent," the swimming classes were underway, for they are mentioned in the book.

When did Jake stop teaching kids to swim? Shirley Porter Erhard of Bull Run Road, Brownsville, was another of Jake's students. She told me that she took lessons from him in the mid-1930s.

"He quit having the lessons not much longer after that," she said. During that span of more than twenty years, Jake conducted his classes at three different spots along the riverbank. For many years, hopeful swimming students convened at the river's edge below Frick patch, just downstream from the water company pump house, on a narrow beach



Jake Swogger (holding megaphone, third from left) with one of his early classes of Water Babies, c. 1915

near the Monongahela Railway yardmaster's office.

Access to that beach led under a short railroad bridge that spanned a ravine along the riverbank. In later years, Jake's classes migrated to two other sites farther up the river toward Alicia.

The Water Babies were primarily a swimming instruction class, but they were an informal social organization as well. And in the early years, they were performers. Inez League Sprinkle, ninety-one, now lives with her niece, Marilu Stapleton Coppinger, in Phoenix, Arizona. Inez remembers learning to swim under the watchful eye of Jake Swogger.

It was 1920, and she was eleven. She recalls that there were eight students in her class, and that the Water Babies put on shows at different pools around the area. She seems to remember that two of the venues at which they performed were Shady Grove near Uniontown and Kennywood Park, which had a giant swimming pool. In return, the children were treated to lunch and enjoyed the trips and participation in the exhibitions.

Inez believes that she was Jake's only student from West Brownsville at that time, and she would walk from West Brownsville to

Newtown for her lessons. She remembers that “Puss” and Leona Hubbs, both deceased, were two of her fellow Water Babies. When the lessons were over, said Inez, the girls were quite hungry and would stop at the Hubbs’ hotel in Newtown and raid the icebox there.

Inez’s niece, Marilu Coppinger, was herself a sort of Water Baby. In the early 1930s, her mother, Mrs. James “Dutch” Stapleton, engaged Jake to give Marilu private swimming lessons.

“I was not a very good student,” says Marilu, “and didn’t enjoy being in a class of one.”

During that same era, the mid-1930s, Ed Porter took swimming lessons from Jake. Ed now lives in St. Augustine, Florida. He lived on Telegraph Road as a boy.

“My sister Shirley, my brother Bernie, and I believe a neighbor girl, Ann Hibbs, were taken by my aunt Thelma Porter to learn to swim with Jake Swogger,” Ed told me.

“Our route to get there from where we lived was to take Telegraph Road south to the old one-room Charleston School, turn right, and drive a couple of miles to the river. We parked on a lot that was or had been a slate dump, walked across some railroad tracks, and scrambled down the riverbank to the water. Jake was there with life jackets. Jake would give each beginning student a cork life jacket to wear, and the dog paddle was usually the first stroke taught.

“We then paddled around in the river for an hour or so,” Ed continued. “The water was filthy with coal tailings and oil from the barges and boats that plied the river. These boats caused waves as they passed, which would swamp us swimmers.”

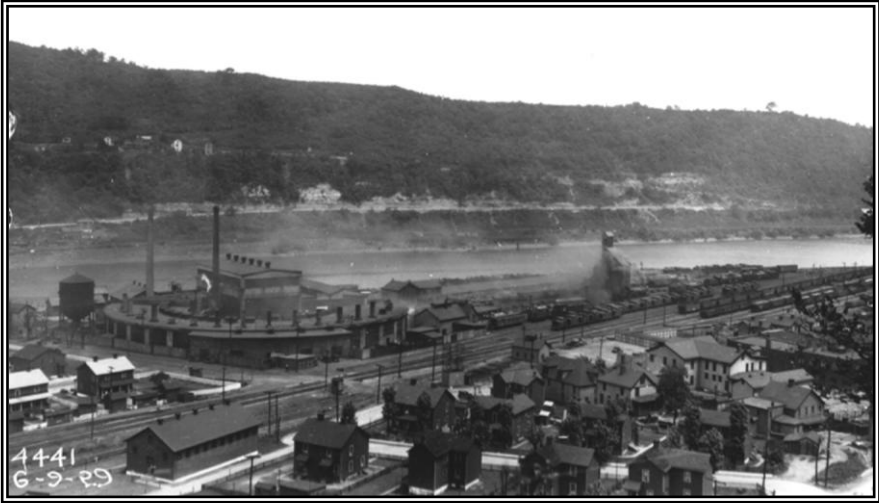
Ed’s sister, Shirley Porter Erhard, now lives on Bull Run Road. She was about eight years old when she became a Water Baby. She too remembers the quality of the waters of the Monongahela. On some days, swimming was out of the question.

“There was often an oil or gasoline slick from the boats, and you wouldn’t be able to swim.” In fact, Shirley confessed that she never did learn how to swim. “I’ve always been afraid of the water.”

“You didn’t graduate?” I asked. “Then I guess you had no WB on your bathing suit?”

You see, Jake awarded the letters “WB” to be sewn on the bathing suit of anyone who “graduated” from his swimming classes. To graduate from the Water Babies and earn the coveted “WB,” the student had to swim across the Monongahela and back. A row boat would accompany the child as he or she attempted the round trip. The boy in the boat for some of those years was Jake’s grandson, Don Swogger.

Don is the son of the late Charles B. Swogger. When I talked with



The focal point of this 1929 photo, taken in south Brownsville, was the Monongahela Railway roundhouse. The Water Babies learned to swim and practiced at various sites along the river near these rail facilities.

Don at his home in Hiller, he told me that his job was to assist any students “in trouble.” In all of his years at the oars, Don did not recall anyone requiring a rescue.

For many of the years during which he conducted the classes, Jake was rarely seen without his megaphone. This was his usual means of communicating with the swimmers in the water.

“You’ll never be a swimmer,” Jake would call, “if you don’t keep your chin in the water,” remembered one of his Water Babies. Jake customarily wore a bathing suit of a nondescript brownish-gray color with a few sporty horizontal stripes. We can only imagine what effect the river’s waters had on the original color of that bathing suit.

Jake also brought a pair of oars with him. He or an assistant would carry the oars to the beach for class, use them in the safety row boat, then tote them back home again.

Where was home for Jake? For many years, Jake lived in a small bungalow along Seventeenth Street between Water Street and Second Street. Near the end of his life, Jake lived at the home of his son, Charles B. Swogger, along Hollow Road in south Brownsville. According to grandson Don, Jake died in 1943 and is buried at Bridgeport Cemetery in south Brownsville, not far from his beloved Maizie. There is no stone marking his grave.

So what are we to make of this unusual man? At first blush, Jake Swogger was an eccentric, a riverboat captain turned Sunday School teacher and swimming instructor.

But to those who know the tragic story of Jake and Maizie, he was a man to be admired. He made a promise, and he kept it. He surrounded himself with the children of his town. He dedicated his life to them, as his beloved Maizie would have done had she lived beyond her sixteenth year. He lived much of his life alone, but he was not a lonely man. Far from it.

Jake Swogger is gone, but he is not forgotten. This quiet man made a lasting impression upon the hundreds of children whom he taught about Christ and about swimming. They are much older now. But they still enjoy sharing the memories of those summer days that they spent with Jake, listening to his stories and learning about life, as he taught them to swim in the waters of the Monongahela.

*CENTURY-OLD PAMPHLET SHEDS NEW LIGHT ON
STORY OF MAIZIE SWOGGER'S SUNDAY SCHOOL*

Water Babies, Water Babies. And graduates of Maizie and Jake Swogger's Newtown Sunday School. They're everywhere! Who knew?

After publishing a series of columns on a particular topic, I usually receive some phone calls, emails and letters about that topic from readers who have additional information to share. I customarily wait a week or two after the original articles appear in the newspaper. Then if the volume of feedback warrants it, I write one follow-up column in which I pass along these additional anecdotes. In the case of Maizie and Jake Swogger and the Water Babies, that plan is not going to work.

The articles about Maizie Swogger's Sunday School and Jake Swogger's Water Babies have generated so many phone calls, emails and letters that a single follow-up column cannot do justice to the readers who took time to share their memories with me. So I will pass some of them on to you in this column, particularly those about Maizie Swogger's Sunday School, and in the next column, I will share some fascinating new vignettes about Jake and the Water Babies.

Miss Ethel McGinty, a retired English teacher and former co-worker of mine at Brownsville Area High School, lives on Lewis Street in Brownsville. She called and offered to lend me a pamphlet entitled "The Newtown Christian Union Mission Sunday School." Its author was the Rev. A. F. Hanes of Brownsville's First Christian Church. It was

written sometime around 1913 and was published by the Fayette County Sunday School Association.

It is a four-page pamphlet. On its first page is a photograph, taken outdoors in a field, of the “Second Section” (the afternoon session) of the Newtown Christian Union Mission Sunday School. The text of the pamphlet reveals some additional information about Maizie and Jake Swogger and the earliest days of their unique Sunday School.

When twelve-year-old Maizie founded the Sunday School in 1908, it had no building in which to meet. Services were held outdoors in the warm months. In the winter, Maizie traveled from house to house, ministering to the families of Newtown. This pattern continued for two or three years.

Then in 1911, according to the Rev. Hanes’ article, Maizie secured an abandoned school building to use as a place of worship. Unfortunately, the reason the building had been abandoned was that a new school had been constructed to replace it. The Rev. Hanes wrote that “the seats [in the abandoned school] were all removed and transferred to the new school building. Left thus without seats, the children collected boxes and old cans and used them for seats. When spring came, Maizie, then but a little girl of fifteen, led her children out into a field and instructed them in the way of the Lord.”

What I found interesting was the Rev. Hanes’ description of the enormous crowds of curious onlookers who would come to see the outdoor services. Apparently, this all-child-led Sunday School was a local sensation.

“Once or twice,” wrote the Rev. Hanes, “the curious crowds became so annoying that Maizie was compelled to appeal to her father, who was the constable in South Brownsville, for protection.”

It was after that chaotic summer that the H. C. Frick Coke Company offered Maizie an unused “First Aid House” as a building in which they could meet. The building had steam heat and electric lights, but its size was only twelve by twenty feet. This necessitated having two “sections” of Sunday School, since all members could not fit in the building at once. Sometime in the years that followed, the Sunday School apparently was moved from the First Aid House to a site along Alicia Road.

“I remember the Sunday School,” said Tony Vigliotti, who called me after the appearance of the original column. Tony lives on Boyd Avenue in Brownsville. “I was a Catholic, but my parents would make me go to the Sunday School. And I know there were a lot of other Catholics who went there too.

“They moved the Sunday School from the patch up towards

Eighteenth Street,” Tony told me. “The road that leads from Eighteenth Street out toward Maxwell and LaBelle was called Alicia Road. One day last week, after your article was in the paper, my wife and I took a ride up to the Bridgeport mine.

“I parked up where the mine office was, and I walked around the mine and over to where the old steps used to be. The coal company built steps from near the main office building all the way up the hill to Hiller. Years ago, men who worked at the mine would walk all the way down those steps to the mine, then back up to Hiller at the end of the day.”

After some searching, Tony found the crumbling steps, then set off seeking another connection with his past.

“I took the car and went up along Alicia Road.” Tony was journeying toward the site of the Newtown Union Christian Mission Sunday School building where he attended Sunday School so long ago.

“Is the Sunday School building still there?” I asked him.

“No, there’s no building there,” Tony said. “It’s pretty grown up with weeds now. I tried to find anything that would give me the exact location. I walked around, but I couldn’t find anything.”

Cecil Burton of Pine Street, Brownsville, called to say, “I lived back of the old company store, and I remember the church used to be up by the old railroad tracks. I remember going to that church, and Jake was there. There was a big crowd, and I remember a girl named Annie Knight and some others were taking care of it.”

Mrs. Betty Meissner Wence of Brownsville told me, “I remember that Sunday School really well. We called it the Bunkhouse, though. Every Christmas, he would give all of us a box of chocolate-covered cherries. He did that on his own.”

Though the Sunday School was founded by his daughter, Jake’s lifelong heartsickness at her early death was brought home to me by Betty Wence’s final comment to me. “I didn’t know he had a daughter until I read the article. He never talked about his daughter.”

Unable to speak about his beloved Maizie, Jake honored his daughter’s memory not through words, but through his actions.

Ethel McGinty’s pamphlet also cleared up another question that had puzzled me. I had wondered why Maizie was baptized as a Baptist. The answer, revealed in the Rev. Hanes’ account, gives us a glimpse into the earliest history of the First Christian Church of Brownsville.

The Rev. Hanes wrote, “As her work progressed, Maizie realized that in order to accomplish her mission, she must be baptized and come into the church. Her father is a member of the Christian Church and her training had been along that line, but there not being a congregation in Brownsville at that time, on November 24, 1912, she went to the

Brownsville Baptist church and was baptized by the pastor, and from that time on was happy in her Christian life.”

The Brownsville Baptist church to which the Rev. Hanes referred was in a building still standing at the intersection of Market Street and Albany Road. The implication in this passage is that the baptism ceremony took place inside the Baptist church.

My thanks to Ethel McGinty for sharing with our readers this piece of Brownsville’s history.

***UNUSUAL EXHIBITION ATTRACTED CROWDS
TO THE BANKS OF THE MONONGAHELA RIVER***

The handcuffs were placed around the young girl’s wrists, which she willingly held out in front of her. The old man clicked them shut and looked up at Mary, who was barely a teenager. Then he raised his hand high, holding the key to the handcuffs up in the air to be seen by the crowd along the riverbank.

The key was dangling on a thin rope. Many in the crowd glanced at each other, puzzled and a bit uneasy, as Mary bowed her head slightly and studied her imprisoned wrists. The man’s weathered hands gently placed the rope and key around her head and guided it down over her bathing cap onto her shoulders. Mary watched him quietly as he did it. With the unusual necklace in place, he looked at his thirteen-year-old protégé again and gave a slight nod.

Mary turned toward the river. A crude wooden pier led out over the green-brown water. Placing a bare foot up onto the pier, she stepped up and purposefully strode out to the last rough plank.

Attached to the pier was a wooden diving board. Her hands still handcuffed in front of her, Mary walked slowly out to the end of the board and looked down into the water. The river was deep here.

All eyes along the shore were locked on Mary. There were a few muffled gasps as the spectators realized what she was about to do. The diminutive girl did not once look back at the shore. Without hesitation, Mary jumped into the river.

She sank like a stone. Tense seconds passed. On shore, spectators unconsciously held their breath in empathy with the submerged girl. Every gaze was fixed on the serenely widening circle of ripples emanating from the spot where she had disappeared.

No Mary.

Then her head broke through the surface. Gasping, she held her

handcuffed wrists out in front of her. Legs churning, gulping air, Mary's full attention was on the rope floating in the water in front of her face. Still attached around her neck, it held the precious key.

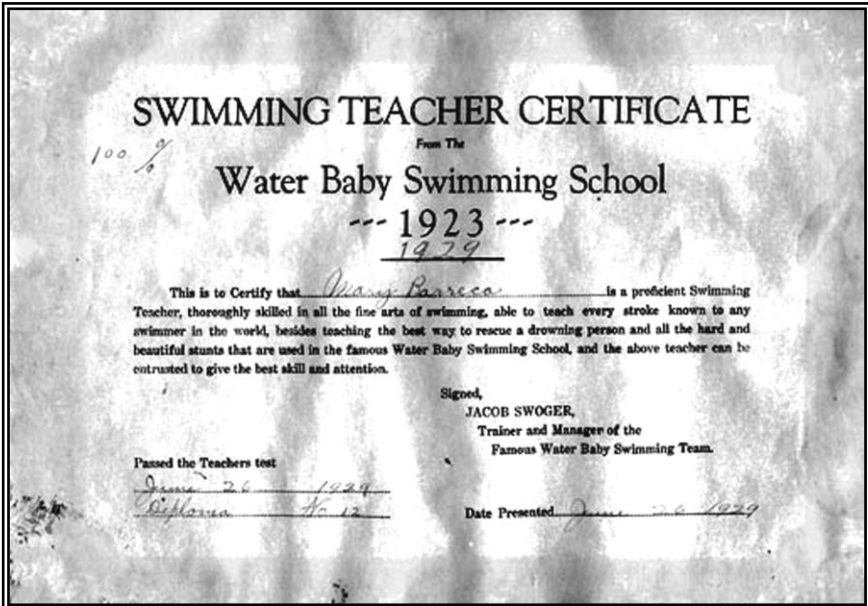
Mary's face lunged forward at the key, grasping part of the rope and key in her mouth. Treading water furiously with her legs, Mary maneuvered the key around in her mouth until she had it between her teeth. She took forceful breaths through her nose, working to keep her face above the surface as she pulled her hands through the water toward her face.

Her vision impaired by water running into her eyes, she concentrated fully on inserting the key into the handcuffs' lock. She felt the key find its home, held her teeth firmly on the key, and turned it in the lock. The handcuffs sprung open.

Mary spit out the key and turned toward the spectators. She raised her hands triumphantly from the water, the unlocked handcuff dangling from her wrist. The crowd roared with laughter and delight, applauding wildly as she swam back to shore.

That was seventy years ago. The thirteen-year-old girl was Sheridan Avenue's Mary Barreca, one of Jake Swogger's most outstanding pupils. Today, eighty-two-year-old Mary Barreca Mulyar lives on Spring Street in Brownsville. Her handcuff stunt was one of the acts performed at the Water Babies exhibitions.

Mary showed me an aging diploma. It was issued to Mary Barreca by Jake Swogger on June 26, 1929. Still in its frame, it reads "Swimming



Teacher Certificate from the Water Baby Swimming School.”

“In order to get the teacher’s diploma,” Mary said, “we had to cross the river and back. We also had to swim from the Hillman Barge down to the Monongahela underpass (near the railroad yard office) and learn all of the strokes.”

Only eleven years old when she became a Water Baby, she was a swimming teacher at thirteen and was featured in the Water Babies exhibitions. In fact, Mary told me the Water Babies were planning to attend the Olympics and perform an exhibition there, but Jake couldn’t afford to pay for it and the money for the trip couldn’t be raised.

“We were all getting ready to go to the Olympics. We had the clothes and everything ready to go, but some of the Brownsville merchants would support us and some wouldn’t, so we didn’t get to go. We were disappointed.

“I also swam with Johnny Weissmuller and Paul Wyatt,” Mary said, showing me a photograph of her with the two famous swimmers. Both were swimming medalists in the 1924 and 1928 Olympics, and they attended a performance of the Water Babies in Brownsville, where they were introduced to the crowd. Paul Wyatt was a resident of California, Pennsylvania. Weissmuller’s later claim to fame was his movie role as Tarzan, and it was his friendship with Wyatt that brought the two of them to Brownsville.

Betty Meissner Wence of Watkins Drive, Brownsville, told me “Jake taught me how to swim. I must have been about twelve or thirteen. At one time, I was supposed to go to Brownsville to get my Water Baby picture taken, but I was pretty timid and I didn’t go. So Jake drew a picture of me, put it in a frame, made up a couple of verses about me and gave it to me. It doesn’t look anything like me, but the thought was there. I still have that picture. That was in 1941.” Jake would have been in his seventies by then.

“Was he still teaching swimming in 1941?”

“Yes, he was. My mother wouldn’t let me go in the river until I learned how to swim, and it had to be by him (Jake). We used to walk a mile along the Alicia Road with a wagon load of lifesavers, then we went down to swim. That was around seven in the morning. On the way back, there was a family in Alicia, I think their name was Baron. They would give us water to drink before we came home.”

“Jake lived in a small place on Second Street. You went up a little hill. He had a room full of lifesavers. That was the first thing he taught us. We had to put on the lifesavers before going into the river. I have often wondered since what happened to all of them.

“He would stop at our place. My mother would offer him coffee.

He wanted one cup of coffee and two cups of water. He would put half of the coffee in a glass and fill the rest with water and that's the way he'd drink it."

Cecil Burton of Pine Street, Brownsville, also remembered swimming at Alicia. "I went swimming with Jake in the mid-thirties up near Marine Ways, which was not open then due to the Depression."

"Were the Water Babies still performing exhibitions by that time?"

"Mostly just learning to swim. About ten of us would walk to Alicia and he'd tell us stories along the way. Once he told us how he lost his watch in the river when he was working on the riverboats. He told us that twenty years later he found it and it was still running.

"'You know why it was still running?' he asked us. We said, 'No, we don't know why it was still running, Jake.' He said, 'The current kept it wound up!'"

Cecil laughed. "We used to like to hear those stories. We would follow him all over. We thought he was something."

Tony Vigliotti lives on Boyd Avenue in Hiller. "I was one of his Water Babies in the 1930s. I remember Mary Barreca helping. My father, Charles "Mundy" Vigliotti, was one of his instructors.

"Jake used to walk quite a bit," Tony remembers. "He always wore a corduroy coat, vest, and a gold watch with a chain across his vest. He used to walk up to Newtown, where my parents had Vigliotti's store. We lived upstairs. Jake used to stop and have coffee and sit and talk.

"He was a friend to everybody. A bunch of us kids were led by Marion Klingensmith and Bud Purcell, who were two or three years older than I was. We had old lard cans for making noise. We made signs, paraded up and down the streets in Newtown, encouraging people to vote for Jake for Constable. When he ran for Constable, it was automatic that he would win."

That is not surprising. Jake Swogger made quite an impression on folks that has not faded with the years. I would like to thank Doris Amos Moffitt of Brownsville (whose mother, Ruth Amos, was also a Water Baby), Doris Wright Coldren of Brownsville, Franklin Austin of Blainesburg, Don Meissner of Waynesburg, and Jean Klingensmith Sutton of Aliquippa. All of these folks are former Water Babies who contacted me, and I have enjoyed sharing their memories of Jake Swogger and the South Brownsville Water Babies.