

JCHC JOURNAL

J E F F E R S O N C O U N T Y H I S T O R I C A L C O M M I S S I O N

UPCOMING MEETINGS

- July 19, 2023 10:00 a.m.
- September 20, 2023 10:00 a.m.
- November 15, 2023 10:00 a.m.

PORT ARTHUR QUASQUICENTENNIAL

LESLIE MCMAHEN

Port Arthur was officially incorporated as a city on May 28, 1898. To date, several events commemorating the city's 125th anniversary have been held or planned, which include the following:

- Honorary renaming of a portion of 4th Street in the downtown area to Quasquicentennial Way
- Birthday party held on May 24th in Holmes Park on the grounds of the Sub-Courthouse
- Memorial tree planting in front of City Hall on May 28th

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Photo Showing members of the Port Arthur 125th Commission as well as other City and County dignitaries. Photo Courtesy of Leslie McMahan

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- Other events, such as a time capsule burial, will be forthcoming as plans come to fruition.

A more ambitious activity, a historical marker tour of the city, started out as one including only those in the downtown area noting early Port Arthur events, but now has become one for the whole city. Photographs of Port Arthur markers were gathered from the JCHC files, some photos were retaken as needed, and others taken for the first time. A marker map of the city has been developed in printable form that has the city divided into eight areas with the markers pinned in their appropriated locations. An interactive map similar to the printable version is in development, and will allow anyone to click on the pinned locations and see the context photo and close-up photo of each marker or memorial, including military history markers and markers that have been relocated to places outside of the city. The latter version will be accessible from a variety of mobile devices. Both versions will be uploaded to the PA125.com website when they are ready.

SMILE, THOUGH YOUR HEART IS BREAKING... THE STORY OF JACK AND BELLE MCGREEVY

MIKE MCGREEVY

I present an account of a few of the early residents of Beaumont. Not the ones that made their fortunes in timber, shipping, or petroleum. Nor even the folks that cut the trees, loaded the freight, or drilled the wells. Needless to say, the contribution of all these people enabled this area to flourish. "But all work and no play, makes Jack a dull boy." As technological discoveries began to make basic survival easier, the desire for some edification and leisure-time amusement grew. Since ancient times, minstrels and bards have wandered the Earth, communicating, developing the arts, from village to town to city. A poet, a musician, or even a travelling salesman with an entertaining pitch was a highly anticipated event to bored populations in isolated places.



An illustration of the McGreevy's from the San Francisco Chronicle. Dated August 7, 1910

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Touring theater companies, circuses, and tent shows, originally traveling by wagon, then later by train, became an immensely popular form of public entertainment. Following the tracks as they spread across the frontier, the companies stopped and performed in each likely town for a while, then moved on to the next. In 1886, several of the theater owners in the big cities formed alliances. They established scheduled tours called “circuits” and actively scouted and contracted talent that would bring quality entertainment to the masses. Competition between alliances often got brutal, and no expense was spared in trying to crush rivals. More opulent theaters were being built and growing towns were added to the routes. The traveling variety shows came to be an institution collectively known as Vaudeville.

In the first third of the twentieth century, Vaudeville brought performers of every kind; slapstick comics, dramatic thespians, and dancers of every variety. There was everything from “Ragtime” bands to classical orchestras, sentimental singers, and amazing magicians. Distinguished orators, thrilling stunts, and exotic oddities, were shipped in and put on display for eager audiences in developing towns across America. Entertainment sections in most national and local periodicals lavishly advertised upcoming shows, critically reviewed the performances, and gossiped about the actors’ personal lives. Vaudeville’s popularity at the “turn of the century” certainly compares to that of movie, television, and pop culture celebrities in this era. Theaters such as the Kyle Opera House, the Goodhue Theater, and others in Beaumont and Port Arthur affiliated with the circuits from early on. There were hundreds of acts vying to get on stage, but there was one act that became a sensation, especially on Beaumont stages, for more than a decade. Between 1904 and 1915, a husband-and-wife duo, billed simply as Mr. & Mrs. Jack McGreevy were a hit on the big-time Vaudeville circuits, and they came to Beaumont on numerous occasions, even debuting what became their signature act at a gala at Magnolia Park. They were particularly loved here and returned often because they were locals.

John “Jack” McGreevy was born in 1873 in Mason City, Illinois. His father, Ed, was the son of Irish immigrants and as soon as the Transcontinental Railroad reached Cook County, Illinois, his birthplace south of Chicago, he secured employment and became a section boss on the early Chicago & Altus Railroad. In 1863, He and Julia Ann Barrett of Fort Wayne, Indiana married and settled in Odell. They soon had the first of six children and, as the rails moved southwest, so did the McGreevy’s. They lived for several years in St. Louis, Missouri during the 1880’s, and young Jack, who played the fiddle and enjoyed attention, was exposed to the wonders of the traveling theater companies, circuses, and variety shows that poured through Old St. Louis. As he got older, he and

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his brother, Tom did not relish a future laying rails and driving spikes. They dreamed of fame and fortune and worked up a funny gymnastic routine, said their farewells and ran away to join the circus.

They soon joined "*Doctor Spau's Electric Belt Medicine Show*." Not really a circus, but it was performing, and for a little pay. During a stunt, Tom took an errant tumble and injured himself. Spau told them that they were not particularly good anyway and fired them. Tom quit show business for good and went home, but Jack persisted. For a time, he loitered around beer halls and tent shows making friends. He also fiddled for anyone who would hire him, from busking and barn dances to orchestras. He developed a fine singing voice and had a natural gift for mummery. As he picked up bits of work, Jack honed his craft which included gymnastics and contortions, and was noticed by the right people. Jack soon found himself regularly engaged, and he worked hard at becoming a very skilled actor, singer, dancer, and musician. He was well-liked by audiences and the press and even became respected by his high-ego peers, surly managers, and the jaded stagehands. He soon secured higher tier roles with some of the bigger touring theater companies like the Gagnon-Pollack and the Albert Taylor troupes. While Jack was becoming more famous, his family again followed railroad work further southwest to Cass County in North Texas. The oldest McGreevy brother, Ed, Jr. married and moved to Louisiana to start his (and my) branch of the family. In about 1899 the rest of the family came south to Beaumont and settled.

In 1902, Jack was traveling in the south acting in plays and singing with the Johnny Swore troupe where he met and fell in love with fellow thespian Annabel "*Belle*" Parrish. Belle's parents had been show-people, and she had been performing since she was a child. She kept a home on Church St. in Galveston and her widowed mother lived in Beaumont. Belle and Jack became the McGreevy's somewhere along the road, and soon developed and perfected an act that was to become iconic and later copied on Vaudeville stages and even television across America:

*****Mr. & Mrs. Jack McGreevy*****

The Village Fiddler and the Farmer's Daughter

*****Ragtime Relics*****

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The act consisted of a fast-paced comedic interchange between Jack, as a wily old vagabond fiddler, and Belle as an innocent country girl, with a joyful village dance for a grand finale. Jack wore an ancient suit of clothes, eyepatch, wig, and make-up to assume his character. With skillful control of posture and voice, the transformation was startling and immediately relatable to the people. Belle assumed her not-so-naïve country girl character by donning pigtails, striped stockings, and a padded pink checkered dress to enhance her plumpness. She accompanied Jack's fiddling on a "Zobo" (a brass tuba with the mouthpiece replaced by a kazoo) and drove home the punchlines. Besides being funny, their stage patter was instantly relatable to the audience, and touchingly nostalgic. They constantly updated and polished the act to stay fresh and timely.



Jack McGreevy as "the Village Fiddler"

They seemed to have everything going for them. With a wonderful marriage and a killer act, they left Swore's troupe and signed on with the big time: the famous Orpheum West circuit. Life was grand. They became stars and shared a passionate life of travel and culture, sharing the bill with top names like Houdini, Keaton, and Bernhardt. They made friends across America. What could make it more perfect? Why children of course! In July of 1903, Catherine Rose McGreevy was born in San Antonio, Texas. Jack and Belle were totally smitten, called her "Little Gem," and doted on her. She had adoring chorus girls and softhearted stagehands for "aunties and uncles" on the road. Whenever they were booked into Beaumont venues it became a full-blown family reunion and the local newspapers were always cheerfully granted access. At Magnolia Park in 1904, the McGreevy's headlined a gala that debuted the "Ragtime Relics" characters for the first time to the hometown crowd. Always a smash,

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there are many reviews, theater ads, and in-depth interviews in the Beaumont Daily Enterprise and Journal archives.

During the 1906 touring season, they were blessed with a second daughter. Little Miriam McGreevy was almost born at sea, and they nicknamed her Myrtle after the ship they were on. It had barely docked in time for the birth. At some point, Jack & Belle acquired a home at 2106 Sabine Pass. Jack's mother, Julia, and three of her adult children all lived nearby on Ducette Street. Tom and Will were employed by the railroad and Mamie was a telephone switchboard operator.

As a result of all the good press, Belle and Jack were getting longer bookings and higher billing. They had put their hearts and souls into each performance, and it was paying off. February 24th, 1907, was an exciting day for the McGreevy family. They were starting what surely would be a marvelous new touring season with the Orpheum, and the family were at a Galveston wharf excitedly preparing to board a steamship to San Francisco. A cold February wind blew in from the Gulf of Mexico. Steamships and docks were very boisterous and hazardous places. Jack was likely focused on the boarding procedures and Belle's attention was surely on soothing baby Myrtle, when, suddenly, four-year-old Catherine pulled away from the hand of the houseboy. She ran, laughing down the dock, and tripped and toppled into an open boiler filled with steaming condensate. Scalded over her entire body, she died screaming in Jack's arms. They were emotionally devastated, but with contractual obligations, they had little time to grieve. They hastily had their little daughter's remains interred in a Galveston cemetery, tried to assemble their wits, and resumed the journey. They mourned on the road, bowing to the cheers night after lonely night.

Myrtle gave them the strength to carry on. She was a fixture on the circuit until, tragically, in 1910 Belle found the four-year-old unresponsive in her bed. The best doctors in San Francisco were consulted and diagnosed her with encephalitis resulting in severe infantile paralysis. They urged an immediate surgical procedure that all but touched her little brain. They used the latest technology available to them, but she did not survive. Newspapers across North America carried the tragic story, and Jack brought Myrtle's remains by train to his family in Beaumont. There he purchased a private plot at Magnolia Cemetery and arranged for the exhumation of Catherine's little coffin in Galveston and had both girls buried next to one another. Jack, and particularly Belle were devastated beyond description, but *"the show must go on."*

Still silently grieving their daughters and dealing with the pain by trekking far and working hard, a bright ray of hope was bestowed. A baby boy was born at home in Galveston in 1911. They put lofty expectations on John, Jr.,

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but it was to be a dirty trick of fate. Something was wrong. Johnny couldn't keep any milk down and was gone six days after he was born. He, too, now lies in that Magnolia Cemetery plot between his sisters. To deal with the sorrow, all Jack and Bella could do was do what they knew. Work through it. They had contractual obligations, so Mr. & Mrs. Jack McGreevy still got on that train. Onward they went, dealing with their despair by, ironically, making other people; thousands of other people, delighted.

To add betrayal to sadness, was a report that a "wrong friend" stole \$2,500 in cash and jewels from them. Dedicated as they were to the theater, their relationship with each other suffered. Even though they were playing the most luxurious theaters on Broadway, both were distant and morose when off the stage. They began to distrust each other. Belle had "hysterical episodes" and even made a few halfhearted attempts at suicide. Jack's health was also declining, making travel difficult, and frustrating his ability to meet his own performance standards. In 1914, he was diagnosed with tuberculosis. He spent close to a year in St. Anthony's Sanitarium in Las Vegas, New Mexico. Showing no improvement, he came home, lingered for two months, and passed away at 5:30 p.m. on May 28, 1915. He was laid out for the vigil at his mother's home and the funeral rite was held at St.

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Little Myrtle McGreevy Dead.

A message was received yesterday by Mrs. Richard Haynes from her brother, Jack McGreevy, announcing the death of his little 4-year-old daughter, Myrtle. The message was sent from San Francisco, and announced that the little child had died Monday night from inflammation of the brain, and that he would leave tonight for Beaumont.

Jack McGreevy is a Beaumont boy who has been in vaudeville for several years and has made good. He has many friends here besides his sister, his mother and a brother. Jack McGreevy was here last several months ago, when a brother died.

Myrtle McGreevy's Obituary, Beaumont Enterprise

FRANK WEBER, manager of Nathan's, left for New York, where he will look over the markets there and make such purchases as may appeal to him. The policy of the Nathan store, which is known to always have an open eye for things that will find a ready sale, will be carried out by Mr. Weber and a big shipment of goods at any time would not be a surprise.

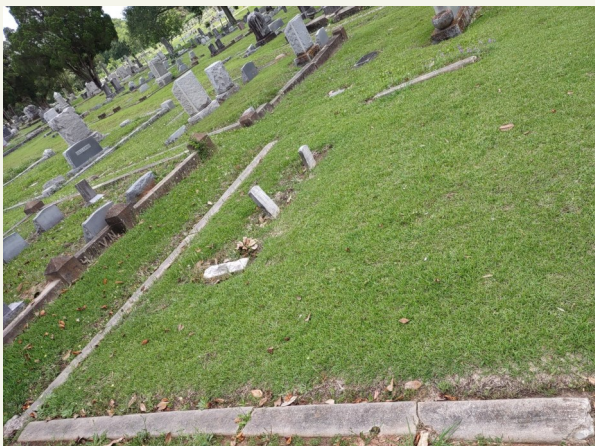
Mr. and Mrs. Jack McGreevy arrived in the city yesterday, having in charge the body of their 4-year-old daughter Myrtle, who died in San Francisco several days ago, as was announced in this paper at the time. Funeral services will be held this afternoon at 5 o'clock from the residence of Mrs. McGreevy's mother, 102 Madison street, after which interment will take place at Magnolia cemetery.

Myrtle McGreevy's body comes to Beaumont, Beaumont Enterprise

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Anne's Catholic Church. Having been a member of Elks Lodge No 1 in New York City, Elks Lodge No. 311 of Beaumont performed the graveside rituals under the direction of Brulin and Pipkin Funeral Home. He now lies next to Catherine, but without a marker. If one day, you should find yourself at the entrance of Magnolia Cemetery in Beaumont, go in, park at the office, walk a few yards east, and you will come upon a grassy, empty-looking plot, startlingly out of place amidst the sprawling assemblage of crypts, statues, and obelisks. Look closer along what remains of the old concrete curbing, and you will discern a crooked row of three tiny white marble headstones. It looks lonely and sad even without the story, and I occasionally go there to sit on a bench and reflect.

As for Belle, with Jack dead and the old beloved act history, her resources did not last long. She had buried her whole family, and there just was not much to keep her in Beaumont. She and her mother decided to go to Chicago. Hoping to get booked on the reputation of the old show, Belle put together a song and dance act called Mrs. McGreevy & Co. Unfortunately, it was not very successful and got booked into smaller and smaller towns until they found themselves stranded and destitute in the "sticks." The Chicago Tribune published a story about her plight after she was prevented from leaping out of the fourth-floor window of her hotel room. She was hysterical and put in a Chicago jail for observation, then admitted to the insane asylum. The last I heard of her was a small blurb about a group of Chicago actors who had established a fund to help actors who had fallen into troubled times.



*McGreevy Plot in Magnolia Cemetery, Beaumont, TX.
Photo courtesy of Mike McGreevy.*

Jack's mother, Julia, was my great-great grandmother, who passed away in 1924 and rests with her family there at Magnolia. Julia outlived her entire family except for her eldest son, Ed, Jr., whose family was living and thriving in Port Arthur by this time. His descendants fought in wars, had babies, and have stories of their own.

TEXAS HISTORICAL COMMISSION
PRESENTS THIS
2022
DISTINGUISHED SERVICE AWARD
TO
JEFFERSON COUNTY HISTORICAL COMMISSION

IN RECOGNITION OF ITS ACTIVE
AND WELL-BALANCED PRESERVATION PROGRAM


EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
June 01, 2023
DATE



TEXAS
HISTORICAL
COMMISSION
REAL PLACES TELLING REAL STORIES

Once again, a well-deserved “**congratulations**” is due to our Jefferson County Historical Commission appointees. As a Distinguished Service Award recipient by the Texas Historical Commission, the JCHC is being recognized for “exceptional service” to preservation in Jefferson County. The 2022 Distinguished Service Award is the 41st such award received by the JCHC and is the 37th consecutive year that the JCHC has been a recipient. Particular highlights of the 2022 year for the JCHC include:

- *Continued work on the Historical Resources Survey of Jefferson County*
 - *Partnership with local preservation organizations*
 - *Second Annual Magnolia Cemetery History Tour*
 - *Fifth annual JCHC History Calendar*
- *Over 4,800 combined volunteer hours by our appointees*

UPCOMING EVENTS

July 4th, 6:00 p.m.- 9:00 p.m.— 4th of July Celebration, community event at Lamar State College, Port Arthur. Visit portarthur125.com/events for more information.

July 4th, 5:00 p.m.— 9:00 p.m.— 4th of July Celebration at Downtown Event Centre, Beaumont. Visit <https://beaumonteventstx.com> for more information.

July 11-14— Camp Lookinback 2023. For waitlist information, please contact the Beaumont Heritage Society at 409-898-0348

July 20, 5:30 p.m.—7:30 p.m.— Heritage Happy Hour at the Beaumont Art League. Visit <http://beaumontheritage.org/events> for more information.

MARKER SPOTLIGHT: THE TEXAS COMPANY



The Beaumont-Port Arthur area was booming at the turn of the 20th century after the January 10, 1901, discovery of oil at Spindletop. The Texas Fuel Company was formed on March 28, 1901, by J. S. Cullinan, a Pennsylvania oilman and veteran of the Corsicana fields; Arnold Schlaet, manager of the oil business of the New York-based Lapham Brothers; and former Texas governor James S. Hogg and his partner, J. W. Swayne. The company purchased a small tract of land on this site in February 1902, and was reorganized as the Texas Company in April. The Port Arthur Works began operations with two tar stills in April 1903. The refinery's first crude still started on Nov. 13, 1903, producing 1,000 barrels per day, primarily of fuel oil. Kerosene and gasoline were manufactured beginning in 1904. Such innovations as the thermal cracking process, which increased the quantity of gasoline produced from a barrel of crude oil, were perfected here. By the end of 1940, the Port Arthur Works had grown to about 5,000 acres

and 3,897 employees. It processed 35,214,000 barrels of crude in 1941. The Texas Company participated in the World War II effort by exchanging technologies with other oil and gas companies to perfect the new fluid catalytic cracking process to produce high-octane gasoline and feedstock for the new synthetic rubber process. World War II also increased the requirements of all lubricating oils. The Texas Company became Texaco in 1959, and the Port Arthur plant grew throughout the second half of the 20th century as Texaco became one of the world's largest oil companies. It is the only surviving company of the many created during the Spindletop oil boom.

GET IN TOUCH

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