

PASSING OF FAMED 'BLACK PATTI' DEEP LOSS TO THOSE WHO KNEW HER AS A CHILD IN PORTSMOUTH

*Internationally Known; Singer Was Born Here
Showed Talent Early, Old Residents Recall As
They Tell of Mme. Jones' Vivacious Childhood*

Portsmouth Bureau

The death of the internationally famous singer of yesteryear, Madame Sisseretta Jones—beloved by thousands as "Black Patti"—was a peculiar loss and shock to residents of Portsmouth and particularly to the scores of people who remember her as a musically gifted little girl during the years she lived in this city.

For the golden-voiced artist who passed away, almost in obscurity, in a Providence, Rhode Island hospital on June 24, was born and spent her early life right among these people whose good fortune it was to have known "Black Patti" in her youth as well as during the height of her fame and later in her waning days.

"Black Patti's" birthplace was a small two-apartment house on Bart Street, between Chestnut and Effingham Street. This dusty page in the singer's life book was discovered by a Journal and Guide reporter during conversations with some of those who distinctly recall the childhood days here of the vivacious singer.

Parents Lived Here

In those early years she was known to her neighbors by her real maiden and non-professional name—Matilda Joyner. Her parents were the late Mr. and Mrs. Jerry Joyner, who lived here at the Bart Street address.

Perhaps the nearest relatives who survive Mme. Jones are Mrs. Melvina Colden, 2907 High Street, a first cousin, and her daughter, Mrs. Melvina Newsome, of the same address. William Colden, 160 Wool Avenue, a brother of Mrs. Colden, is also a first cousin to the famous singer.

Young Matilda was literally born to strains of music for her mother was a talented musician and vocalist, having sung in the choir of the Ebenezer Baptist Church until her death in 1918.

Early Life Not Easy

Mr. Colden and Mrs. Newsome are now carrying on the traditions of the family, for both are singers of ability. The former is now a member of the Ebenezer Church choir.

According to a story related by Mrs. Colden, the early life of Miss Joyner was not easy. There were two children, Matilda and her late brother, Jerry Joyner, Jr. The mother was forced to drudgery to afford schooling for her children, but young Matilda sang through those days too.

She would mount chairs, bureaus, or tables about the house and sing until her mother chased her out.

Went To School Here

"I never did hear any one sing so much in all my life," her mother would complain.

Senior residents of this city remember the active young Matilda as a student of the old Webster School on Queen Street in the later '70's. Even then she showed possibilities as a singer and would fill the air with melody on the slightest provocation.

Sometime in the early 80's she was sent to the North to further her education.

Married In Late 80's

According to people who knew her, Miss Joyner was married to a man named Richard Jones, of Portsmouth, now deceased in the later 80's. That is a chapter in her life that remains

hazy to all.

About 1890 Matilda Jones, known on the stage as Sisseretta Jones, began to become famous as "Black Patti." She sang with great success before royalty of many countries and in all of the principal cities of Europe.

She later headed her own company, an aggregation of talented performers of that day, known as the "Black Patti Troubadours" which played in every important city of America, the West Indies, and Central America—with sensational success.

Favorite Song

Local citizens remember her in inimitable interpretation of popular songs of the 90's such as, "If You Likka Me Like I Likka You" and "Honey Stay in Your own Backyard," at the old Academy of Music formerly located in the 300 block of High Street.

Mme. Jones was equally effective with the classics. Her favorite song, however, is said to have been "Way Down Upon the Swance River."

During her waning years Mme. Jones became a devoted lover of the church and gave liberally to that cause. A Christmas message from her to Mrs. Newsome last December perhaps reflects best her true personality during these years. It reads

"Dear Sister:

"I sincerely trust that your mother, yourself and all the folks are well and getting along during these hard times. With it all God has been mighty good to us. He has spared us to live to see another Christmas so near. We have everything to be thankful for.

Strongly Religious

I am feeling fine, thanks to the Lord, and I shall continue to thank Him and pray and trust Him until I am called. Give my love to your mother and do write and tell me how she is and Arthur also. Love to all,

"Cousin Sis."

Even when her fortune in diamonds had melted away and once more life and existence became a problem she was generous to others. Whenever she could help a relative or friend in distress she invariably did sometimes to the extent of self denial.

Was Very Sick

In another letter to Mrs. Newsome, dated March 13, 1933, Mme. Jones wrote: "I have been very sick. I went out for the first time to Communion service Sunday. I asked the Lord to give me strength to do so and he answered my petitions. So you see how good my Savior is. I shall continue to pray and trust in the Lord and serve Him until He is ready for me.

"I am practically alone, with only two boys that I have from the state to help me along. They are now 14 and 15 years of age." The letter hinted that the boys were somewhat "troublesome." Mme. Jones commented, "yet I am obliged to put up with them."

As an indication of how deeply religious Mme. Jones was, the following part of the same letter is quoted: "Give Aunt Melvina my love and tell her to continue to pray and trust in God. He alone is the only one to cure all ills."