

Living Legends: The Testimony of Jack Poe

His gangster buddies are all dead—shot, blown up, buried in cement. He’s finally ready to talk.

By by Jeff Bowden

Jack Poe’s father came home one night from the pool hall he managed and walked into the kitchen. When he came out, he had a long wooden match. He broke it and held an end in each hand. “Pick one,” he said to Poe and an older brother. “The long one goes to school. The other stays home with Momma.” A third son, Delmer, had recently died. Rabies. The boys’ mother was incapacitated with grief. Poe’s daddy wasn’t talking about college or even high school. He was talking about first grade. Jack Poe drew the short end.

Whenever Poe talks about such things, I fight the urge to sit on the floor at his feet. I’ve watched others succumb to the same impulse. I once got as close as a windowsill, six inches off the ground, at his home in East Texas. He kept asking if I wanted a chair and I kept saying that I was fine.

We met for the first time when he was in town for a funeral. At 80, funerals demand an increasing amount of his attention. When I picked him up at his motel in Garland, he was dressed head to toe in brown: shoes, pants, shirt, tie, sport coat. His pocket square was brown. We were headed to Arlington, to the site of Top O’ the Hill Terrace, which in the 1930s and ’40s, was the Six Flags of vice—a ride for every desire. During the Depression, while the rest of Arlington subsisted on cornbread, Top O’ the Hill customers feasted on steak and wine. There was a brothel on site and a casino buried deep inside the main building, hidden by two-way mirrors and arrived at by passwords and secret doors. The entire hillside was crisscrossed with escape tunnels and patrolled by armed guards. Reportedly, Benny Binion built the Horseshoe Casino in Las Vegas with the money he won at Top O’ the Hill.

Jack Poe lived and worked at Top O’ the Hill for five years as the nearly adopted son of owner Fred Browning. Poe let me take him back.

If you met Poe at any time in the last 50 years, you had no idea of his gangster past. He wasn’t ready to talk. In the intervening years he’d built an impeccable reputation as a construction superintendent for T.C. Bateson Company. Poe built much of UT Arlington and Dallas Baptist University. He supervised the construction of hospital additions at Parkland and Methodist Medical Center, and he built one of the first high-rises on Turtle Creek. When he retired from active construction, Poe served as plant supervisor for Dallas Baptist. Although he obtained college degrees in structural and electrical engineering, Poe never attended a single day of public school.

“I stayed with Momma until I was 11,” he explained, as we wove through traffic toward Arlington. “At night, I could hear her calling for my dead brother. It was awful. I wasn’t much for bad news after that.” Poe left home for good when he was 13.

Almost 70 years later, his eyes redden when he recalls the image of his mother standing on the porch. “She kept saying, ‘Don’t go, Jack. You’re too young.’ But I wanted excitement. I wanted money. I’d already been around a good bit.” Poe knew most of the moonshiners in Arlington. They liked him, and he liked to drink their drippings.

Within months, he was taking care of Browning’s racehorses stabled at Top O’ the Hill. By the time he was 15, Poe had also worked various nightclubs along a violent stretch of the Jacksboro Highway in Fort Worth. He was a lookout, a bodyguard, manager of a whorehouse—and perhaps other, darker things.

It’s impossible to verify much of Jack Poe’s early life, although the latter part is archived in pictures, letters of reference, and yellowed newspaper articles. The people who knew him when he worked the gambling joints are all dead—shot, blown up, or buried alive in cement and dumped in the Trinity River. There were three dumpings. The killers got the doomed men drunk, bound them in chicken wire, then poured the concrete.

Before we headed up the long winding drive to Top O’ the Hill, Poe and I parked at the intersection of Division and West Bend. I left the car running. “There was a greyhound track right here,” he said. “At night, I walked the dogs.” Today, an RV dealership, a driving range, and a topless nightclub have replaced the track. “I’d walk them for 20 minutes, then cross the highway to a joint called The Bend. I pulled up at the bar one night and this young lady sat down beside me and said, ‘Aren’t you awful young to be drinking beer?’ I was 13. I asked her how old I had to be. There weren’t any laws back then. Not like today. I bought her a two-cent jug of beer.” The woman said her name was Bonnie.

Poe let the woman and her friend in on a little scam he was running. "Every night I cleaned up the dog track offices," he said. "I'd noticed that they used the same color betting tickets on the same days each week. I'd been keeping them." For half the payoff, Poe offered Bonnie and her friend some surefire winners. They won a pile of money.

Eventually Bonnie asked Poe if he knew who they were. He said he didn't. "There wasn't TV or radio like today," Poe said. "Plus, I couldn't read." Poe made runs with Bonnie Parker and Clyde Barrow to Oklahoma and Central Texas, and to case a bank in Handley. "Clyde put me in the middle of them," Poe said. "They put their arms around me, like I was their kid. Clyde was just a-studying that bank. Walked by it three or four times."

"Weren't you afraid?" I asked.

"Nah," he said flatly. "They were nice to me. I guess a kid likes anybody who'll be nice to them. I never did have the feeling of fear. I don't know what people are talking about when they say, 'I was so scared I was about to die.'"

"Well, did they rob it?" I asked.

Poe quickly erected a wall of laughter. "I don't know," he said. "It was robbed."

The last night Poe was with them, Clyde called him into his motel bedroom. "Clyde always stayed in there by himself," Poe said. "He was always looking at maps. He stuffed my pockets with money. I don't know why. I buried that money underneath the horse barn at Top O' Hill Terrace. I had nearly all of it five years later when I bought a car to court my future wife, Theda."

If you want evidence that the Baptists shall inherit the earth, drive down Division Street in Arlington until you come to a pair of turreted guard houses protecting a driveway overhung by oaks. In 1956, Arlington Baptist Seminary bought Top O' the Hill Terrace. Poe grew quiet as we slipped past the gate. "It was terrible the first time I came back here," he said.

Vickie Bryant met us at the campus bookstore. She's the resident historian. For an hour, Bryant, Poe, and I toured the basement and the grounds. At times, when he tried to pin down a memory or the location of a secret tunnel, Poe seemed disoriented, as if ghosts were spinning him in circles. Perhaps he wanted us to think he'd forgotten what was where. His hair, normally slicked back in neat silver waves, extended further and further from his head. Occasionally he asked Bryant a cryptic question, "Did you ever hit anything when you were digging out here?"

Sometimes he smiled, like when he peered out a wrought-iron gate, which today hangs on the edge of a slumping escarpment. He grinned broadly. "What, Jack?" Bryant said. "You know something, don't you?" He turned away. Later he told me, "There was a house right there for the gamblers and the prostitutes to do their business. I used to get the girls. Whatever a customer wanted."

Marriage and World War II saved Poe's life. "I had a lot of stuff going on when we got married. Bad stuff. Those clubs were going full blast."

In 1944, Poe ran over a land mine in Italy and was torn open by shrapnel. "I was laying in the hospital when they brought in a bunch of soldiers," he said. "One of them was a black man from Henderson, Texas, Bose Williams. Bose got me a drink of water. He asked me if I knew Jesus. I said I didn't. He said, 'I'm going to sit right here and pray for you until you believe in Him.' I thought, 'Man, you are going to be there a long time.'"

He was. For three days, Bose Williams sat at Jack Poe's bedside. Finally, Poe yielded. He went home a new man and turned his back on his old life.

Poe almost lost his religion a few years ago. Terrible headaches indicated a growth on his brain. Surgery and pain left him dependent on prescription drugs.

"Where was God?" I asked him. It was a few days after our visit in Dallas. I went to see him at his home in East Texas. Winter light filtered into his living room.

"I don't know," he said. "He undoubtedly left me. When I came back to my mind, He came with me. It was smooth sailing until Theda died." Poe and his first wife were married for 61 years. She taught him how to read. He never told her much of his past. He was too ashamed. Never told his children or grandchildren either. "I thought I'd lost everything again. But God gave me someone else, Linda. I never expected it."

Just before I left, Poe and I got up to see his and Linda's travel trailer and his woodshop. They have plans to hit the road next summer. In the woodshop, Poe builds cedar chests, cabinets, and rocking horses. He built an altar for the Masons. He told me that I

wasn't asking enough questions. I told him that I was listening for the end of his story. He grabbed me by the arm on the steps that descend into his backyard. The swimming pool has been filled in.

"Jeff, I'll tell you how it ends," he said. "You tell them that there's not a human being on earth who could leave as happy as me. I'm close to the end. I know that. But I've lived the life God wanted me to live. He got me out of that life I was living. Give Him the glory for everything I've accomplished. He built all those buildings."

He continued on, insistent. If he hadn't been holding me by the arm I might have sat down. "Listen," he said. "Not long ago, I gave my testimony at church. I went back the next Sunday. A 13-year-old boy walked forward and gave his life to God. I went up and put my arms around him. 'I'm so proud of you for making this decision today,' I told him." The boy smiled.

"Oh, Mr. Poe,' he said. 'I didn't make it today. I made it last Sunday. After you spoke.'"