

James Francis Coogan

Born 17 October 1875. Died 24 July 1941 at Braddock, PA. Age 65

Prepared by Brother James L. Coogan, F.S.C.

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James Francis was the third son born to John Coogan and Margaret Coogans Coogan (her mother's maiden name – Keenan) at Dalziel, near Motherwell, Lanark County, Scotland. In all, there were seven other children in the family: Patrick (1871), Thomas (1873), Joseph (1879), Mary (1881), Winifred (1883), Anne (1893) John (1895). There was possibly another son, Francis, as the name frequently occurs in family records.⁷⁰

Although the family lived in Scotland, it was probably of Irish origin and could likely have come to Wishaw to escape the famine and political troubles that plagued Ireland at that time. Research suggests that the Coogans (or Coogans, and Cougan, (as sometimes spelled) came from County Carlow as other branches emigrated from there to settle in Lincoln, Illinois and Midwestern United States where the name frequently appears⁷¹. There is also a hint that the early family members came from County Clare where the name is found as well, but there is no verification of that fact.

In any case, family members considered themselves Scottish and claimed that country as home. It is presumed that those who lived into the Twentieth Century never had contact with their Irish kinsmen and never spoke of any association with them. It is not known that the principals mentioned ever returned to Scotland once they had emigrated.

Not much is know of James's earliest years. It is presumed that he was educated in the Catholic school of Wishaw as he was literate. His father, at times identified as a coal miner, was rather prosperous and the owner of a furniture and drapery business in Wishaw. When Catherine Coogan La Londe visited Wishaw in 1980, a building with the name of Coogan still existed in the city. Grandson Jack offered an opinion as to why we had no pictures of our grandfather: It seems that he was an amateur photographer and since he took the pictures, he never appeared in them.

Immigration papers indicate that James worked as a steam crane operator before leaving Scotland. After his marriage to Margaret Callahan on July 19, 1899 at St. Patrick's church, Wishaw, he came to America in 1903 along with his father, John. His wife Margaret (22) and sons John P., born June 1, 1900 and Francis J., born April 22, 1902 came the following year. They arrived here May 16, 1904. As the *Furnessia* sailed through the Narrows en route to Ellis Island, it passed by the Statue of Liberty prompting Mrs. Coogan to say, "Aye, John, and now you are going to be a wee Yankee."

⁷⁰ Cf. LaLonde Family genealogy as given by Catherine "Kitty" Coogan LaLonde.

⁷¹ Coogan Family History, private circulation through Sisters of BVM, Dubuque, Iowa.

James Francis Coogan

The family settled in Fayette City, Fayette County, Pennsylvania where work was to be found in the coalmines. Mrs. Coogan did not want her sons to be miners nor did she wish to be a miner's widow so she persuaded James to find work first at the Westinghouse Air Brake in Turtle Creek and later after World War I with the repair shops of the Pennsylvania Railroad in Wilmerding. A second reason prompting the move was recurring summer unemployment due to a drop in water levels at the river that prevented movement of coal barges to the mills down river.

It is noted that John Coogan, Sr., most likely went into Turtle Creek also to find work as he is registered as living there at the time of his death from nephritis at the Pittsburgh Mercy Hospital in 1914. His Mass was held at St. Colman's church and he is buried at the Monongahela (renamed All Saints) Cemetery, Division 6, Row 5, Grave #32. Shortly thereafter Mrs. John Coogan went to Canonsburg to live with son Tom. Other brothers and sisters of James also moved to Canonsburg, Washington County, taking residence 208 Orchard St near the Chartiers Creek (they had to cross a little bridge to reach home) and later to Detroit.

James and Margaret had five Children: John (1 June 1900), Francis J. (4 April 1903), Margaret Mary Herzog (4 April 1905), Mary Bridget (10 October 1907) and James Andrew (22 January 1913). All were educated at parish elementary schools and possibly public high schools although this fact cannot be verified.

Industrious by nature, James was always able to find work to support his family. They eventually moved into Turtle Creek with residence most likely at 1022 Oak Ave. as the children attended St. Colman's school. With WW I work was plentiful as Sr. Margaret observed, "the family came into its own at this time. Some time later, the family was able to purchase a home at 2412 Monongahela Ave., Swissvale, where the youngsters continued their education at St. Anselm's School and possibly Swissvale High School. Perhaps it was here that Mary first met the Greensburg Sisters of Charity, which she joined in 1925.

A recollection of Granddad Coogan by grandson James recalls that the person stood at about 5' 6", was of a stocky build, had salt, pepper gray thinning hair, and always had a Santa-like twinkle in his eyes. He seemed to laugh a great deal and he had a heavy Scottish burr. On one occasion, while visiting granddad at his Woodstock Ave. home, he remarked to his son John, "Aye, your wee one is dumb." Angrily, Daddy asked why he thought that and his reply suggested that the younger boy did not seem to understand grandfather when he spoke. To this Daddy replied, "That is because of your Scottish burr." Whereupon the older man became incensed replying, "Accent? Accent? I ha' been in this country 35 years and I dunno' have an accent". With this, John told his kids it was time to leave.

James Francis Coogan

The incident serves to highlight what appears to be a feature of the Coogans - so free with their conversation that they often said things to one another's annoyance. This usually caused an abrupt cut-off in a visit or phone conversation. However, after a few weeks things would be back to normal and nothing more was made of the erstwhile offense.

A serious breach between the Pittsburgh and Detroit branches of the family occurred over two significant events as hypothesized by Catherine Coogan LaLonde who was then living in Detroit. The first came about when Mrs. John Coogan, Sr. passed away in 1925. James, his wife Margaret and son John went to Detroit for the funeral of Margaret Coogan. Two years later, when Mrs. James F. Coogan died, no one journeyed to Pittsburgh for the obsequies. Offense was taken by this lack of reciprocity.

The second incident, as recalled by Catherine, centers on the fact that John Coogan, the furniture merchant, was by law prohibited from taking all of his funds with him when he left Wishaw in 1903. Upon the death of his wife, this money was left to the surviving children. Three of these, allegedly Joseph, Patrick and Winifred, went to Scotland, obtained the money, but did not share it with the other surviving children.

Mrs. James F. Coogan died at the Pittsburgh Hospital on November 10, 1927 from complications due to gall bladder infection, a common problem of the day and for which surgery was not used at the time. It is interesting to note that James married a second time. Because his daughter had joined the Sisters of Charity (much to her mother's disappointment) James visited there with some frequency. In the course of these visits he met Ellen Shields (Gordon) of Braddock who also had a daughter, Mary Regina, (Sister Mary Gervase) with the Sisters. Since Mrs. Shields was widowed, the two became close friends and later married on November 28, 1928.⁷² For some reason this union did not sit well with some of the Coogan children, notably Sister Margaret. When we visited the household, Ellen would sit in but seldom spoke and only once can it be recalled that we went there for dinner.

It is interesting to note that we have almost no pictures of our grandfather. Grandson Jack suggests that a reason for this lay in the fact that he was an amateur photographer and took many of the family photos.

John F. Coogan remembers that, about 1938, Granddad bought a Willys-Knight car. One summer afternoon he took Bill and himself for a ride. "We were going to go Knoxville and visit Frank's family. He was not a very good driver and we got lost in Schenley Park. This did not bother him. He said we were just out for a drive. We finally found our way to Frank's just in time to start back home. He was a pipe smoker and we always bought him a pound tin of Union Jack tobacco for Christmas. The Willys-Knight car was sold after his death as part of his estate."

⁷² See scrapbook for artifact documentation.

James Francis Coogan

James continued employment at various occupations, even for a time at the Edgar Thompson steel mill. He was supposedly dismissed from there for sleeping on the job. Eventually he was taken on by the Streets Department of the Swissvale Borough where he stayed until his death. In his last position with the Swissvale Borough, James fell while tree trimming and was hospitalized at the Braddock General Hospital with broken ribs. He soon developed pneumonia and died July 24, 1941. Burial took place at St. Joseph's (now All Saints) Cemetery, Braddock where he is buried next to his wife in Section A, Lot 83, B. Later his son James A. was buried in the same grave as his mother.