

[HISTORY]



Ghoulish Gallop

For the past 20 years the annual **EverGreen Pumpkin Run** has given participants the opportunity to tour Evergreen Cemetery as they race to the finish line. The oldest cemetery in the city, Evergreen is the resting place of many notable local figures such as Arthur and Ninah Cummer, the family who laid the foundation for the Cummer Museum, and Amelia Isaac and Louis Garrett, siblings who experienced the sinking of the *Titanic* and lived to tell the tale. On October 27, Pumpkin Runners have the choice between a 5K or 10-mile distance, and each receives a medal upon finishing. Pumpkins that line the course are available to take home, and there will be a celebration with food and drinks for those who cross the finish line...alive. Keep your eyes peeled: as you run, you may see local legends: The Lady in Violet, the old man in the hat, or the woman at the "Ugly Angel" tombstone cheering. It is a graveyard, after all. ★

—CAMERON ROGERS



Ardys Clawson and Elvis in 1965

All Shook Up

At three Jax shows in the '50s, Elvis Presley left lasting memories with screaming fans

BY LAURA HAMPTON

WHIPPED INTO A FRENZY BY A SULTRY VOICE, tousled jet-black hair, a heart-wrenching smile and primitive body gyrations, teenage girls who attended Elvis Presley's early concerts were usually described in newspaper reports with one adjective: "screaming."

Though former City of Jacksonville employee Ardys Bell Clawson was a fan who saw Presley four times, she denies ever being so moved.

"I liked him, honey, but I've never screamed over him," Clawson says in a phone interview from her DeBary, Florida, home. "I wasn't a screamer." She may have been the only one.

Early in his career, Presley spent a lot of time in Florida. According to University Press author Bob Kealing's book, *Elvis Ignited: The Rise of an Icon in Florida*, Presley scheduled four tours in the state in a 15-month period between 1955 and 1956. In Jacksonville, he played at Wolfson Park in May

1955, at the Gator Bowl in February 1956 and at the Florida Theatre in August 1956.

Clawson was one of the lucky girls who got up close and personal with The King, and she has the photos to prove it.

During his first Jacksonville show at Wolfson Park in the spring of '55, Presley was the opening act for Hank Snow's Country and Western Jamboree. Snow was popular; Elvis was relatively unknown above the Mason-Dixon line. "He wasn't top dog," Clawson recalls. "But when he sang, the girls went nuts."

According to Mitch Hemann, an archivist with the Jacksonville Historical Society, Elvis got "a little cocky" that night and invited the girls backstage after the show.

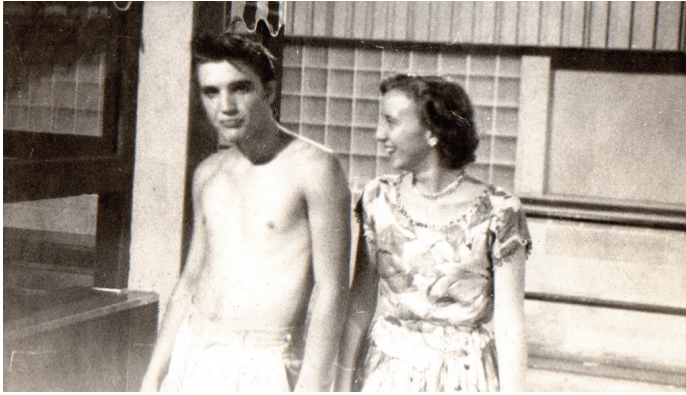
"They took him up on the offer and chased him down into the showers," Hemann says. "They tore his clothes off and kind of attacked the guy."



THE SHOW GOES ON

The longest running community theatre in Florida, and one of the oldest in the United States, **Theatre Jacksonville** celebrates its 100th birthday this year. Originally called The Little Theatre of Jacksonville, one could purchase a season membership at only five bucks, giving aspiring actors a chance to perfect their craft and encouraging a sense of art appreciation. Over the years, community support has helped the institution overcome the challenges it has faced and remain a cultural mecca for one hundred years. How are they marking the centennial? By doing what they do best, performing. This season Theatre Jacksonville brings classics to the stage such as *12 Angry Men*, *Shadowlands*, and Roald Dahl's *Matilda*. ★ —CAMERON ROGERS

MELISSA BUNNI ELIAN FOR THE EQUAL JUSTICE INITIATIVE



Though some have claimed the incident was the first “Elvis riot,” Numa Saisselin, president of the Florida Theatre, says there is a lot of urban mythologizing around Elvis’ Florida shows. “I have heard people say the Florida Theatre show was his first theater show, which is not true. I have heard people say it was his first indoor show, which is not true. I have even heard people say it was his first show anywhere, which is not true.”

What we do know for sure is that Clawson and her brother found Elvis eating ice from a soda box after that May 1955 mauling. In a photo Clawson donated to the Jacksonville Historical Society, a very slender, shirtless, ice-chomping Presley poses with a beaming 18-year-old girl.

“It looks like I was gaga over him, but I wasn’t,” Clawson says. “I was smiling at him and thinking about what those girls had done to him.”

In February 1956, Clawson attended the Gator Bowl concert with her brother, who again had a camera in tow. There, she had her picture taken with a much more relaxed, and clothed, Elvis.

“He was more popular then,” Clawson remembers. “But not so much that you couldn’t get close to him.”

By the time of Elvis’ last Jacksonville concert in that 15-month period, he was well on his way to superstar status. In January 1956, Elvis made his first national television appearance on *Stage Show*, a CBS TV series hosted by big band leaders Tommy and Jimmy Dorsey. In March 1956, he released his first album, “Elvis Presley,” and just days before his scheduled Florida Theatre appearance, an article in *Look* magazine labeled the entertainer “a wild troubadour who wails rock n’ roll tunes, flails erratically at a guitar and wriggles like a peep-show dancer.”

Jacksonville civic groups and community leaders were aghast.

After receiving reports of riots from law enforcement, Duval County Judge Marion Gooding invited Presley to his chambers ahead of the August 1956 shows at the Florida Theatre to discuss what on-stage behavior would and would not be tolerated.

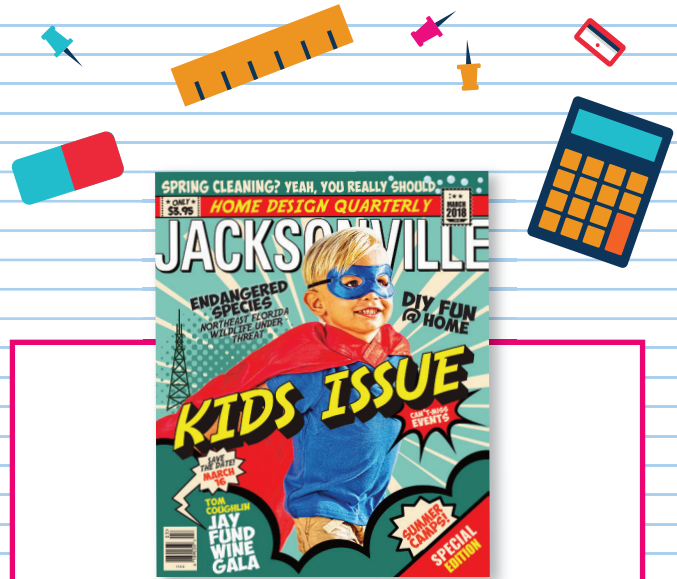
The judge told Elvis he did not want a repeat of the chaos during the 1955 Jacksonville concert, Saisselin says. “And if Elvis did those hip-gyrating movements during his performance, he would be arrested for ‘impairing the morality of minors.’”

During the first concert at the theatre, the judge and several members of the “civic group” that filed a petition to censor the performance sat in the front rows. And though Judge Gooding had a subpoena in his pocket, it was unnecessary. By all accounts, Elvis played it straight that night, and some said he behaved like a perfect gentleman.

Judge Gooding reportedly enjoyed the concert and was said to be a lifelong fan. Maybe Elvis won the judge over because he was very respectful during their closed-door meeting, or maybe the judge was genuinely taken with Elvis’ musical talent.

More likely, though, the judge appreciated Elvis’ sense of humor. He reportedly laughed along with the rest of the audience when Elvis dedicated the final song of the concert to “the judge.”

The song was Elvis Presley’s 1956 hit “Hound Dog.” ★

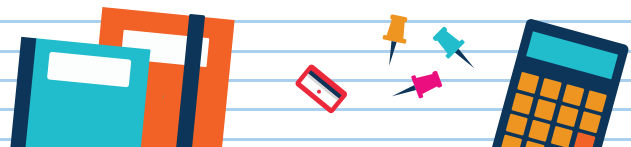


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