

# TAXI DRIVER

TEXT AND PHOTOS  
BY GREG BASHAW



JONES IS AT HOME IN THE FRONT SEAT OF CHECKER NUMBER THREE. HE'S GOT THE LATEST PLAYBOY, TWO TOOTH PICKS, HIS PALL MALLS AND GLASSES WITHIN EASY REACH

**P**hil Jones has been a carny in Kentucky, a doorman in New Orleans, and a Alfalfa cutter in Kansas. But now he's back home, a cabbie in Lawrence.

From noon to midnight, six days a week, Jones cruises the city in car number three of the Yellow Cab Company. He's been a cabbie off and on for 26 of his 47 years and logged more miles than any checker he's ever driven. His two-toothed grin and bloodshot blues eyes show it.

"I been in all the states, 'cept Alaska and Hawaii, some of 'em several times, but I always end up comin' back here," he says. "I know I can always get on drivin' a cab."

It's near noon on a Tuesday. Inside the small, glass enclosed DISPATCHERS ONLY quarters at the cab office, 11th and New Jersey, is a lit-up switchboard, a radio crackling with static, styrofoam cups haf filled with cold co'd coffee, and a chorus of three women chirping into telephones and a microphone. Open the door and the stale smell of cigarettes and powerful perfume seeps out of the rc room.

"Car four, when you vacate, pick up at the K-Mart," Patty, the dispatcher, calls into the mike in front of her.

"Who's that guy that's been around 'bout a month now, the tall one that comes in every morning and says, 'Hello squirrels, I mean girls?'" the switchboard woman asks Patty.

The answering service woman swivels on her chair. "oh, yeeech, he's strange. What is he about seven feet tall?"

"'Bout that probably. His name's Phil, he drives number three," Patty answers. "He's alright. I went out partyin' with him the other night, us and Jim. Had a lot of fun, believe it or not."

Into the outer office bounds Jone Jones, bulging out of a checked pants & yellow shirt too zippy for a cabbie. He's coughing as it

he had a mouthful of bile but tosses 55 cents into the cigarette machine for a pack of Pall Mall straights anyway. Then he walks to the dispatchers' office to sign in.

"Good morning squirrels, I mean girls," he says, grabbing the run sheets. "Who smells so good in here?"

"Yeeech," says the answering service woman, though she's smiling. A flurry of phone calls and voices fills the office.

"Well, God, don't tell me about your cold ma'am, I'm only his answering service," the woman is saying, as Jones heads for the garage to clean out his Checker Special.

His first fare is an elderly woman who's bundled to the chin against the chill November wind.

"No, I like drivin'," Jones tells her. "Out in the open air most of the time. If I hadda work a factory job or somethin' I'd just go crazy."

For most of the 15-block ride the woman fills Jones in on the latest developments in her pending divorce.

Jones is at home in the front seat of a Checker, turning to talk with his riders, and he's working on number three to make it comfortable. He's got the latest Playboy on the seat, face down under a newspaper, two toothpicks stuck within easy reach in the ceiling, his Pall Malls and glasses rubberbanded to the sun visor, and a seat cushion under his ample fanny. He's only been back from California a month this time but he's got the second newest Checker in the cab company's fleet of 16.

"Ya gotta know how to get around town without hittin' any stop-lights if you wanna drive right," he says, as he turns the cab onto Tennessee Street, his mainline, no-stop express route. "Ya get 46 per cent of the meter so ya don't make any money putterin' around. Most nights I ring up

about 50 bucks on that meter."

He pulls to a slow stop off 22nd and gets out of the cab to open the door for the woman.

Once back in his cushion he writes the destination and charge on a clipboard.

"Didja hear all that talk? If you wanna get all the latest gossip, just drive a cab. But for all the gabbin' and as many man-hours as we put in you don't find many dents in a cab. Cab-bies are always the best drivers in any town."

Jones should know. Though his upturned roots were sown in Lawrence and the University, where his father was a professor of engineering, he's stomped around in more towns than you could name. He remembers his early days in Lawrence with love, the memories embellished with romance over the years, like a movie shot through a soft filter...

...Throwing rocks at the bats that dove for the old streetlight swaying low over the gravel road that the trolley ran on in front of the Spanish style house father built on East 13th Street out of an old university chimney's bricks, then romping off to run knee-deep in the sandpits north of the Santa Fe depot or hang out at Oak Hill Cemetery close enough to hear mother yell Phil-  
Ip! but not answer...

Mothers bend above  
sleeping little sons  
and see future Presidents.  
--Poem by Mrs. Frank E.  
Jones, Phillip's mother.

But mostly Jone's memories are of wanting to leave the city for adolescent adventures in the mountains, a carnival, California. Young Jones stretched the city limits before his clean break for the coast...

...Five bucks in his back pocket,  
he played hookey to ride a plane  
that flew low enough over Law-  
rence to see his mom's white wash  
flapping in the breeze...rode  
aboard in the caboose of the Union

Pacific train to Tonganoxie...  
pumped his red bike to Union Sta-  
tion in Kansas City via K-10...

By 16 he was too itchy to stick out junior high school and hit the road West, with visions of the blue ocean and sunsets over the mountains.

"I'd seen all there was to see in Lawrence and wanted new horizons," he says. "I had sawdust in my feet, always wanted to get on with the carnies. Wanted to get to California."

"It was a rather hot and dry day when Phil Jones left Los Angeles for places unknown."

--First line of an unfinished story Jones started in the 40's.

Near sundown it's so cold that steam from the city sewers form clouds that rise white into the gray sky. Jones pulls number three to the curb by the winking eye of Shenanigan's.

"I was a pin setter in there when it used to be a bowling alley a long, long, long time ago in the days of Methusala."

He sets his quart of milf on the floorboard near the brake before he jumps out to open the door for four Indian women. Jones quaffs four quarts of milk a day while driving "because it makes me tall."

"Who smells so good back there?" Jones asks the women as he steers down Tennessee. A few flakes of snow strike the windshield and disappear.

"It's supposed to snow hard tonight," Jones says. "Six inches."

"That's not what the radio said," one of the women tells him.

"Well, light flurries maybe anyway," he says, grinning. "Every night us cab drivers get off work we go do a snow dance in front of our house."

