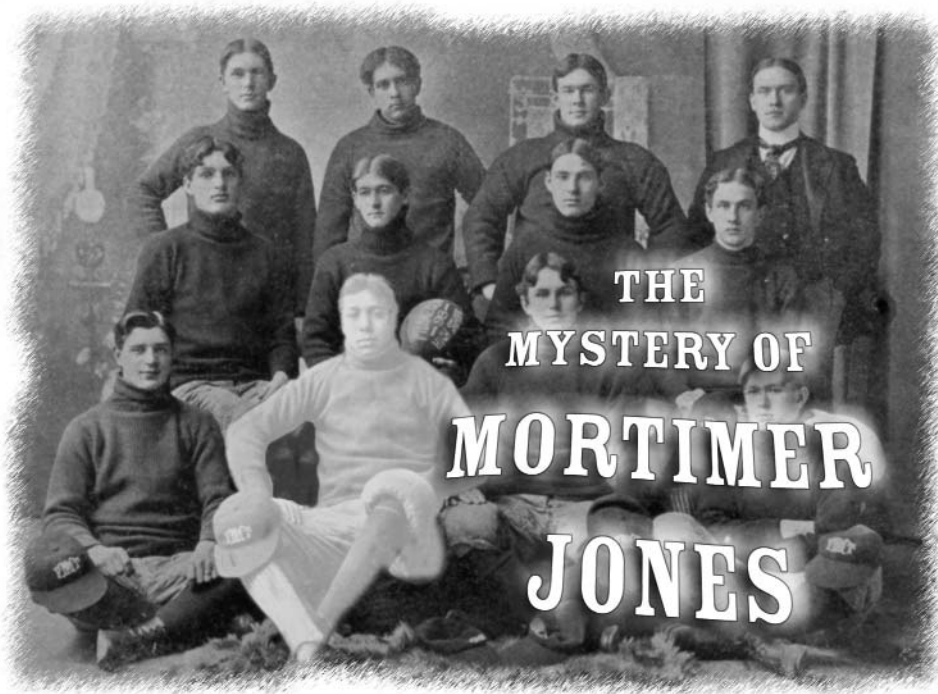


**IN KEEPING WITH THE THEME
OF THIS HOLIDAY WEEKEND,
COUNTLESS MICHIGAN PREP
FOOTBALL PLAYERS AND
COACHES PAST AND PRESENT
COULD BE THANKFUL FOR
MORTIMER JONES. . .**

**. . . EXCEPT HE VANISHED
BEFORE HIS LEGACY
COULD BEGIN**



It was August when word first hit the streets, and with but a few weeks to go before the start of the football season, there was instant turmoil. Unbeknownst to the participants, the events that followed would add a significant chapter to Michigan sports history and ultimately help to mold a school into one of the state's top football programs. But that is getting way ahead of the story.

The fall of 1904 had been the most successful season in 10 seasons of football at Muskegon High School. The city, located at the base of the Muskegon River on the shores of Muskegon Lake and Lake Michigan, boasts miles of shoreline. Thanks to an endless supply of sawmills that lined the lake prior to the turn of the century, the city had earned the title of "Lumber Queen to the World." The hard-working members of the community took great pride in their football team that season, as the Sawdust City squad had sealed its first-ever undefeated season. Perhaps more importantly, the slate included two victories over arch-rival Grand Rapids Central.

Located 40 miles southeast of Muskegon in a valley on the banks of the Grand River, Grand Rapids was a leading manufacturing center and the nation's top producer of fine wood furnishings. The rivalry between the cities had

heated up long before either high school had taken up the gridiron game. Economically, the two cities courted similar businesses and development.

Valley City fans proudly pointed to the fact that their team had dominated the early days of this budding prep football rivalry. However, thanks to the arrival of Head Coach Robert E. Walker at Muskegon in 1903, the tides were starting to turn. A player on Muskegon first team in 1895, Walker led his alma mater to a 5-1-2 mark in his first season as coach, including a win and a tie against the Grand Rapids squad. Walker's team allowed a mere five points in eight contests in 1904, and his team's defense had held the Grand Rapids team scoreless in their two matchups.



Walker's departure to rival Grand Rapids set off a chain reaction that moved Jones to the helm at Muskegon.

Imagine the dismay of Muskegon fans when they learned that two members of the Grand Rapids football team had traveled to the lakeshore to consult with Walker about securing his services for the 1905 season. The move started a whirlwind week and a courtship of the coach by both sides. Timing was on Grand Rapids' side, as Muskegon athletic director Charles M. Williams was out of town at the time, putting the local squad at a decided disadvantage.

On Sept. 6, it was final: Walker had signed a contract with the Valley City team for a salary of \$375 for the season. Muskegon had been pre-

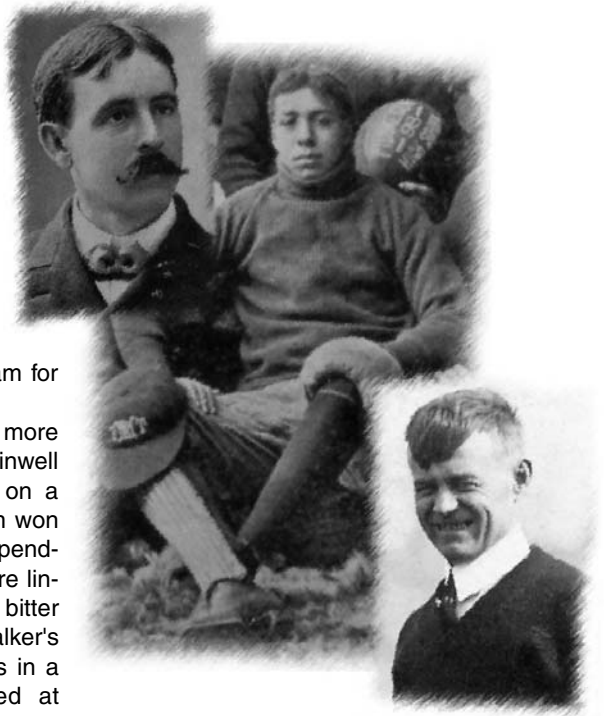
pared to offer \$250 for his duties, and it was reported that Walker would have accepted the lesser amount out of loyalty to the team. However, the offer had arrived too late.

With under a week to go before the team's first practice, the coming season was in complete disarray. A team manager needed to be selected, final scheduling of opponents still had to be done, and questions about financing for the coming season were raised. Still, the immediate question was who Muskegon would secure to coach the team at such a late date. Mortimer Jones, also a Muskegon alum and a former teammate of Walker's, was put temporarily in charge of the squad, and was mentioned as a possible candidate for the position. Jones had, "worked with Walker and understands his methods," accounts stated.

Still, the school cast about for other candidates. After attempts to secure a former Grand Rapids coach failed, the team landed the services of Guy M. Johnson, a Middleville native and assistant coach under the legendary Fielding Yost at the University of Michigan. However, Johnson committed to only two weeks of work with the team before his departure for Johns Hopkins University to study. With time running out, it was decided that Jones would then take over the reins following Johnson's departure. While this move seemed only logical based on his credentials, it was actually stunning and unprecedented.

The son of Charles Erwin Jones and his wife, Emma, William Mortimer Jones had joined the local squad in 1897 and quickly earned a reputation as one of Muskegon's finest ballplayers. Known throughout his high school days as Mortimer, he played

Muskegon alumnus Jones (center) was given the coaching reins by athletic director Charles M. Williams (left) prior to the 1905 season, guiding the squad to a 6-3 mark. When Williams left after the school year, Jones was replaced with Bob Zuppke (right) in the summer of 1906.



right halfback, and served as team captain in 1900. After graduation, Jones "was closely affiliated with the athletic activities of the school during the next few years," and worked with his parents at the barber-shop that they ran from their home.

From the outside, nothing seemed unusual about Jones' selection to coach the team. He certainly appeared qualified. Yet, when one considers the era in which these events occurred, it is important to note that Jones was African-American. He was the first black person to play football at Muskegon, one of the first to play high school football in the state, and is believed to be the first black high school football coach in Michigan history.

In *A Hard Road To Glory, A History of the African-American Athlete 1619-1918*, author Arthur R. Ashe, Jr. notes that some African-Americans found spots on northern college squads with a handful earning All-American honors prior to the 1900 season. A few blacks coached football, but exclusively at the Southern black colleges. Not only was Jones a high school coach, but it was also striking that he was an African-American man in charge of a football team comprised entirely of white players.

The initial reports concerning the team's prospects for the season appeared quite dismal. Only four players were expected to return from Walker's undefeated squad of 1904. Yet, by the time Johnson arrived, an above-average total of 24 candidates turned out for practice. With an average weight of 145 pounds, the team was divided into two squads of twelve for practice and conditioning, one under the guidance of Johnson and the second under the direction of Jones.

According to a preseason article published in Muskegon High School's monthly publication *Said and Done*, "Never in the history of the Muskegon High School, had prospects for turning out a winning football team looked so gloomy as they did at the beginning of season." Noting that Jones would ultimately handle the squad, the writer stated, "We know that he has the interest of the team at heart, and will do all that is possible for the success of 1905 football.

"The rest depends upon the people of the city. If the team has the hearty support of the citizens; if they will help all they can by attending the games, we are safe to say that wherever the Muskegon High School football team plays, the 'red and white' will keep watch over the field."

On Saturday, Sept. 30, the team lined up for its first game of the season, a 34-0 win over a much smaller Spring Lake eleven. Coach Johnson handled the squad for the first match, and then departed for school. Jones took charge and coached the team for the balance of the season.

Jones' team picked up two more victories against teams from Plainwell and Lowell before falling, 21-0, on a road trip to Kalamazoo. The team won another contest, against an independent team from Grand Haven before lining up to face its old coach and bitter rival, Grand Rapids Central. Walker's team downed the Muskegon lads in a clean, hard-fought game played at Ramona Park in the Valley City, 16-0, on Nov. 3. Walker's team scored all of its points in the first half. According to *Said and Done*, "the second half was perhaps the prettiest exhibition of High School football ever seen in the state."

Four days later, in a follow-up article on the game, a quote praising Muskegon's effort against the heavier Grand Rapids team recapped the events of the season: "Coach Jones of the Muskegon High school football team is a colored boy," stated *Grand Rapids Evening Press* reporter, "who for several years was one of the strongest players on the Sawdust City eleven. It is a high tribute to Jones' ability as a player that he was chosen by the Muskegon players as their coach."

Remarkably, this was the first and only mention of Jones' race in the local press that season. The team finished with two more victories and one more defeat – an 11-5 thriller to Benton Harbor – to end the year with a 6-3 mark. They outscored their opponents 150-48 for the season.

The life of Mortimer Jones becomes a mystery after that final football game. Jones would not return as coach the following fall. In an move of amazing luck or astonishing foresight, the high school hired Bob Zuppke to serve as its coach and gymnasium director in the summer of 1906, replacing Jones and Williams, the director of athletics.

Zuppke, who would later achieve incredible success as a college coach at the University of Illinois, was living in Grand Rapids and "had no experience in teaching gymnasium classes," according to his biography, *Zuppke of Illinois*, "but a ten-cent Spalding guide book enabled him to get by."

A University of Wisconsin graduate, he was employed as an artist at an advertising firm prior to landing the Muskegon job. In his four seasons at the helm, he established a sterling reputation as a coach, and helped to solidify Muskegon's status as one of the state's top grid teams.

From the Author: Additional research revealed that Jones and his parents later moved to Grand Rapids where Mortimer worked as a porter at the Furniture Exhibition building. Sadly, he died at the age of 35 after suffering a fractured skull "as the result of a fall to the pavement while alighting from a street car" as he was returning home. He left behind his parents; sisters Edna DeLyons and Winifred Porter; their husbands, William DeLyons and Charles Porter, all residents of Grand Rapids; and, presumably, a younger sister, Louise (Brown), who later married and moved to Wilkesbarre, Pa.

To date, it is unknown if any relatives of Jones survive. The family lived on Eastern Avenue when Mortimer's father, Charles, died in Jan. 6, 1927. Records indicate his mother, Emma V. Jones, passed away in the mid-to-late 1930s. References to Winifred Porter and Edna DeLyons living in the Grand Rapids area disappear in the 1950s.

— Ron Pesch

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