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And Next to the Bearded Lady, Premature Babies

By [MICHAEL BRICK](#)

The babies were lined up under heaters and they breathed filtered air. Few of them weighed more than three pounds. They shared the Boardwalk there on Coney Island with Violetta the Armless Legless Wonder, Princess WeeWee, Ajax the Sword-Swallower and all the rest. From 1903 until the early 1940's, premature infants in incubators were part of the carnival.

It cost a quarter to see the babies, and people came again and again, to coo and to gasp and say look how small, look how small. There were twins, even, George and Norma Johnson, born the day before Independence Day in 1937. They had four and a half pounds between them, appearing in the world a month too soon because Dorothy Johnson stepped off a curb wrong and went into labor.

All those quarters bought a big house at Sea Gate for Dr. Martin A. Couney, the man who put the Coney Island babies on display. He died broken and forgotten in 1950 at 80 years old. The doctor was shunned as an unseemly showman in his time, even as he was credited with popularizing incubators and saving thousands of babies. History did not know what to do; he was inspired and single-minded, distasteful and heroic, ultimately confounding.

He was, in other words, not unlike what Coney Island would become, and half a century after his death the so-called Incubator Doctor has found acceptance among the Boardwalk's latter-day boosters. Yesterday, his legacy went on display, among 11 impresarios, inventors, builders and performers inducted into a new Coney Island Hall of Fame. "Couney was ahead of his time, and he found a place that was receptive to his dreams," said Charles Denson, curator of the hall and executive director of an accompanying oral history project. "Coney Island is the greatest combination of magnificent artifice in a natural setting."

The doctor is a natural symbol for Coney Island, a place where walking down Surf Avenue is like reading an alternate text of "Through the Looking Glass" where Alice is weird, too.

"Looka looka looka!" says the sign on a freak show museum above an Army recruiting office. The surrounding amusements beckon like playmates begging you not to tire of their company: the Tilt-a-Whirl, the Ferris Wheel and the bumper cars, too. The Cyclone, arguably the Boardwalk's greatest standing symbol, is scary for all the wrong reasons, creaking and groaning to remind riders of its age and wooden construction, the selling points that brought them aboard in the first place.

"People like the funky atmosphere," Mr. Denson said. "It's real."

Burdened for decades by a soured reputation as a poor man's paradise, the Boardwalk is in a conflicted revival, with a new subway terminal and a baseball stadium framing dirty streets, tired old barkers with headset microphones and concessions buzzed by flies.

"Any time people have to pay to go into something, it's nice," said Lou, operator of a basketball stand on Stillwell Avenue, who would not give his last name. "Here, people can just walk around."

The hall of fame is intended to draw more visitors, particularly to Astroland, the amusement park where banners honoring Dr. Couney and the others will be hung. Carol Hill Albert, vice president of Astroland and a founder of the Coney Island History Project, said the exhibit might inform the redevelopment of the Boardwalk.

"It has to be done with the old Coney Island in mind," Ms. Albert said. "Some of these early showmen just had remarkable imaginations in terms of fantasy settings."

Even among them, the Incubator Doctor was an oddity. Born in Alsace, France, and trained in Berlin, Dr. Couney began his work when premature babies were pretty much expected to die. He displayed incubators developed by his mentors at the Berlin Exposition of 1896, and though they caught on in Europe, acceptance was slower in the United States.

Using babies from New York hospitals that lacked the facilities to care for them, Dr. Couney mounted a display at Luna Park, a Coney Island amusement park, in 1903, soon adding another at a second Coney Island park, Dreamland. In 1911, his reputation was tarnished when Dreamland went up in flames. The babies were safely whisked to Luna Park, but The New York Times incorrectly reported that six had burned to death. An article the next day under the headline "All Well With the Babies," failed to undo the article's damage.

Still, Dr. Couney continued his display at Luna Park, where he returned summers through the early 1940's, saying he would retire when city hospitals opened robust incubator facilities. He employed new mothers to give milk, plus a French head nurse and his daughter Hildegard. His driving was erratic enough to make the newspapers now and then, and he cut a magisterial figure on the Boardwalk. He took his incubator exhibit around the country, visiting the World's Fair in Chicago in 1933.

In a 1939 New Yorker article, A. J. Liebling described him this way:

"The Doctor is a heavy, solid man with a pronounced stoop. He has the firm but gentle grasp that a man might have after a life of handling canary birds. His hair and mustache are gray, and his clothes combine richness with dignity. He goes in for dark broadcloth and spats and in the street always wears a derby and carries a crook-handled cane."

The article was occasioned by the doctor's appearance at the New York World's Fair, where he was briefly celebrated. In all his years on Coney Island, Dr. Couney called himself a propagandist for premature babies but never escaped the showman's image.

"I can't believe he was naïve about what Coney Island was," said Dr. Jeffrey P. Baker, a pediatrician and a medical historian at Duke University Medical Center. "He went into a place where he knew he'd be put in the midway."

At least 8,000 babies passed through the incubators, and the doctor was credited with saving at least 6,500, according to news reports of the time. The Johnson twins made it off the Boardwalk and grew up strong and tall. George Johnson found work, and a sense of freedom, driving trains up and down the coast for the Pennsylvania Railroad. Norma Johnson married a man named Coe. Between the twins there are nine children, 13 grandchildren and one great-grandchild. George and Norma attended Dr. Couney's induction ceremony yesterday. "My father didn't have any money, and this doctor says you can use our incubator for free, but you have to put them on display on Coney Island," Mr. Johnson said, sitting next to his sister on the porch at the Sheepshead Bay Yacht Club the other day. "It was us and a lot of other people, too."

The twins will turn 68 the day before Independence Day, old enough to enjoy the seaside air on an idle weekday morning.

Down the Boardwalk, the beach is open. Pretty girls and seagulls play their games. For a few dollars, you can watch a baseball game, shoot paint pellets at a hungry young dude or become a tattooed lady.

The likes of Martin A. Couney nobody has seen in 60 years.

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