



Photos By Carla Winn, The Courier-Journal

Columnist Bob Hill stood next to a likeness of Big Jim Porter, who was 7 feet, 8 inches tall.

## Doctors size up story of city's Big Jim Porter

### Diagnosis: Rare hormonal disorder explains his life

A half-dozen retired Louisville doctors sat around a long table reading the life story of a 19th-century man who had been a jockey as a teenager — then grew to be 7 feet, 8 inches.

The man was Big Jim Porter, a Louisville giant of such fame and proportion that Charles Dickens once came to call and described him as “a lighthouse walking among lampposts.”

**Bob Hill**



The doctors who puzzled over Porter's physical metamorphosis are part of a public discussion group that meets monthly at the Family Health Center on Portland Avenue.

Their discussions began with the help of Rick Bell, executive director of Portland's U.S. Marine Hospital Foundation, which is restoring the old hospital located behind the center to Jim Porter-era glory.

The doctors had examined Louisville's medical needs and illnesses through drugs advertised in the local papers in the 1830s, 1860s and 1890s. They had studied hospital admissions of 1872 to learn what ailed the city.

Now they were trying to confirm why Porter had grown.

“It was an interesting case to us,” said Charlie Smith, who practiced internal medicine in Louisville for 40 years.

### Porter's tale

Porter's life and death were duly chronicled around the world in the newspapers and magazines of the day.

Born near Portsmouth, Ohio, in 1811, he moved with his parents to Shippingport, a bustling, freewheeling town that grew up along the Ohio River south of Louisville when the Falls of the Ohio confined river traffic.

He was so small at age 14, his parents feared he could never make a living. He began riding horses at Elm Tree Gardens, a

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The tall, lanky Porter had hands to match, as this Bob Hill comparison shows.

“My sense is that he always lived in two worlds with his size and fame. ... He was both attracted to the attention and turned off by it.”

RICK BELL, who compiled a history of Porter

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racetrack with a three-mile circuit located near what is now 18th Street.

He went to work making barrels at 17, but began growing so fast that his coordination became wobbly, keeping him from holding the tools.

By his mid-20s, he was a rather gaunt, angular, imposing man only 4 inches shy of 8 feet. His weight was estimated at 260 to 300 pounds — not much to spread over 92 inches of height.

“He had a weakness in the region of the knees, and a trustfulness in his long face,” Dickens wrote upon meeting him.

Porter got a job driving hackney coaches carrying passengers from Shippingport and Portland the few open miles to Louisville. He was a giant figure on the coach, his knees drawn up toward his chest. He was able to reach around and open a door without leaving the driver's seat.

As his fame spread, he went on a national tour for about a year, performing with two midgets in productions of “Daniel Boone in Kentucky” and “Gulliver's Travels.”

He often traveled in Louisville with a friend barely 5 feet tall, the two of them endlessly performing an act for spectators:

“How's the weather up there?” the diminutive friend would ask.

“Stormy,” Porter would reply, spitting over his head.

“My sense is that he always lived in two worlds with his size and fame,” said Bell, who compiled the history of Porter. “He hated it but at times he would use it. ... He was both attracted to the attention and turned off by it.”

### Staying in Louisville

Bell said Porter rejected repeated offers by circuses to tour the country, preferring to stay in the Portland-Louisville area, where he owned taverns, became a member of the town council and was a strong supporter of Henry Clay and the Whig party.

“By all accounts,” said Bell, “he was a very heavy drinker, an alcoholic.”

Porter could never hide from his size. The door to his tavern was 10 feet tall, and some of its furniture was designed to

### IF YOU GO

► Doctor's Discussion Group meetings are open to the public. The next one will be Sept. 13 at 9:30 a.m. on the fourth floor of the Family Health Center at 2215 Portland Ave. The topic will be old-time Louisville pharmacies.

► For more information, contact Rick Bell at 772-8328 or visit [www.marinehospital.org](http://www.marinehospital.org).

land tavern in 1859, Louisville's citizens flocked to the funeral home that was building his casket to see its size — and to place their children in it.

The 40-carriage funeral procession, then the largest in Louisville history, went from his Portland home to Cave Hill Cemetery. The doors of the hearse had to be tied shut to keep the 9-foot casket in place.

Porter's mausoleum eventually deteriorated, and the tourists stopped coming. His plain headstone reads:

*James D. Porter  
Born December 15, 1811  
Died April 26, 1859  
Height 7 feet 8 inches.*

### Examining the evidence

The doctors who gathered to examine Porter's life were interested in his story, but the key to their diagnosis came from the physical descriptions from friends and family.

Porter grew so fast. He had oily skin, he never grew a beard and he apparently never shaved. He never married and had no children.

He had weak musculature, bad knees, aching joints, rheumatism, lung problems and apparently died of congestive heart failure.

Nearly 150 years after his death, the doctors' collective opinion was that Porter died as a result of acromegaly, a hormonal disorder caused by a benign tumor of the pituitary that results in an excess production of a growth hormone.

The tumor can seriously inhibit the production of testosterone, which could account for Porter's lack of facial hair and family. All of Porter's physical symptoms were a match for what's known about acromegaly, a disorder that affects about three out of every 1 million people.