

## A&BC Chewing Gum – The Frank Conway story

by his son Alan Conway, with assistance from Nigel Mercer ([Nigel's Webspace](#))

*Frank Conway lived in the East End of London, working the markets and running a small business. We know that Frank dealt with A&BC products in the 1950s and early 60s when A&BC was growing, and he may well have had personal dealings with Rudy Braun or the Coakley brothers. As well as being an interesting tale, it serves to show the type of environment that existed when A&BC were first producing their bubble gum, football cards and other items. It provides a glimpse into one aspect of the world of A&BC, through the life of a character of the time.*

Frank Conway was born on the 4<sup>th</sup> July 1919 into very poor circumstances. The son of Jewish immigrants; his Mother from the Gallancz region by the Black Sea coast of Romania; and his Father 'from Russia'; exactly where, we know not. They lived 'round Stepney Way in London's East End. He was the son of the refugees of their time.



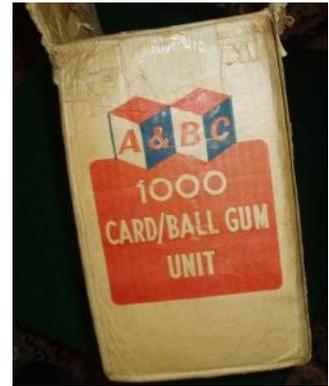
The thing about Frank's parents (the Cohens) was that they were disorganised and did not make the best of what little money they had. His father was something of a gambler too. So, all in all, a very poor situation, what with their five children including Frank, the eldest. Two of his siblings emigrated to Canada and one to Australia, all in search of a better life. Frank's upbringing as a child was very disjointed, disorganised. The story goes that as a baby he slept in an open drawer. Because of poor living conditions he contracted rheumatic fever; which was to catch up with him later and cause the heart condition from which he passed away at just forty seven.



Frank left school when he was twelve and started selling pen nibs outside football grounds in the days before the ball-point pen, before 'the 'Biro'. With next to no money he made the best of what he had, starting in the markets in the early forties. He then developed his small wholesale business, 'Conway Automatics' and wound down the market stalls, but always kept a link with his market days through maintaining the stall in Middlesex Street; better known as the famous 'Petticoat Lane' (see photo of Frank in action). All sorts of 'gear' was sold on his stalls: from hair brushes, combs, hair cream, fabric, to children's books, to picture cards of pop stars and footballers. He dealt in what came his way. He dealt in 'swag'.

He was exuberant and outspoken; at the stall an auctioneer with a comic patter. At one time a dancing dolly puppet was part of his routine. He was an expansive character, very funny. As you can see, in the photos, he was outgoing. Strong willed, extrovert; he would let you know what was on his mind. In 1943 he changed his name by Deed Poll to the anglicised Conway. After all, the Nazis were just across the water and the world around him was less multi-cultural, less tolerant than now. With just a rudimentary education, he was self-taught, taking 'Dale Carnegie' courses, which included public speaking. Frank was so taken with the most famous self-starter guru of that time, the author of 'How to win friends and influence people' that he named his house 'Carnegie'. Frank took his advice to heart and was armed with intelligence and drive, a sense of humour and on occasion, a temper.

'Conway Automatics', at 7, Toynbee Street, was just off Petticoat Lane. 'Automatics' refers to vending machines; the mainstay being bubble gum. These bubble gum machines would be installed outside shops on a sturdy base. Boxes of A&BC ball gum would be stacked up behind the counter of the shop. The gum came in sturdy cardboard 'cube' packaging of maybe 12 or 15 inch dimension. There would also be separate boxes of plastic charms that would be mixed with the Ball Gum. With a stroke of luck a charm just might emerge from the machine with the ball gum to generate a wee bit of excitement. Those were simpler pre-digital days with simpler pleasures.



Eventually, he had just a few people working with him; a secretary, a salesman; a delivery man. He was always looking to new developments and at one time considered opening a launderette; at another an amusement arcade, though nothing came of it. Ball gum was a mainstay and the card series of footballers issued by A&BC in the late fifties is typical of what appeared on the stock list at Toynbee Street. He ran a round of jukeboxes too. Of the jukeboxes; well there were a lot of 45rpm records at the Conway household with holes in the middle! In the early sixties Frank went into roulette tables and hired them out to ATV Television. They would appear as props on TV. When not being televised they slept soundly in the double garage at the back of our house.



He married Mimi soon after the war and in the early fifties moved with his wife and children, Linda and Alan, to a house in Ilford. A modest suburb but still a world away from the Stepney tenement he had been born into. In 1961, funny as it seems now, the family moved back to Hackney as Ilford was 'too far away'. Yes, such a different perspective on what might be an acceptable commute today.

Frank and Mimi lived with her parents their entire married life; a three generational household so much less common these days. Because of the 'scatty' kind of family situation he came from, Frank more or less 'adopted' her parents as his own, and was especially close to his mother-in-law. She came from Poland just after the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Her spoken English was infused with eastern European intonation in a way that has all but disappeared with that generation. Sentences that started out optimistically in English might well close in Yiddish. She never did learn to read or write but what she did have was a homely wisdom and she was a very kind second mother to Frank.

As a teenager Frank learned to play the accordion and he would entertain people down the shelters during the war. He was never enlisted in the forces because of that heart condition. They say that he was the first in the street with a TV set in '46 or '47. He took home movies too; including colour film of the family dating back to the early fifties. He was a go-getter looking to the 'next thing', always with an eye for something new. An example: he bought paint rollers, a new idea for the early fifties; and they flew off the stall. He then thinks to himself, maybe we can make these. So, he employs a guy who was a fur cutter and installed him in the shop at 7 Toynbee Street to knock out paint rollers. Whether they would pass BSI standards today is a good question. An East End tale of market life.

Stock was kept at the family home too. It might be hundreds of plastic toy guitars one week and walking sticks the next; and mock porcelain figurines the next. He bought bankrupt stock to sell on wholesale or maybe, through the stalls. You know, we can get nostalgic about the past but it was an uncertain life; nothing guaranteed. Another strand of the business as it developed was exhibiting at the Boys and Girls Exhibitions that were held at Olympia in the early sixties. Two crazes where he was in at the beginning and had trading involvement with were 'Scoubidou' and 'Hula Hoops'. The family at home would be bending lengths of plastic around and fixing them together with a little wooden lug to make those hoops. These crazes return in cycles. The singer Grace Jones performed at

the Queen's Jubilee concert just a year or two ago in London, singing...whilst dancing with a Hula Hoop.

Letting props to ATV he would from time to time be given complementary tickets. Frank and his daughter made it to the small screen jiving on the '6-5 Special' rock and roll TV programme. They broadcast live in those days.

The little shop at 7 Toynbee Street has a tenacious history of survival. The shop front was painted unremarkable mid blue. Outside there was a metallic sign over the door, like a pub sign; with 'Conway Automatics' inscribed in silver italic script against a red background. You'd go in, a regular counter to the left behind which, typically, would be stacked with goods, as often as not boxes of ball gum. A shop area, maybe 20 feet by 15 feet. On the right steps down to a dank cellar where there was more storage and pretty dubious bathroom facilities. Back up on the ground floor a glass partition shielding a small office with a few desks. It was partly a wholesale business where people would come in and deals would be done, and partly a stock store-room. Frank rented the shop, we think, from the Council.

Frank needed a replacement for a diseased valve to his heart and in 1966 such operations were in their infancy. He died on December 2<sup>nd</sup> 1966. You could say that the childhood poverty from which he had escaped materially caught up with him eventually medically. But my, he did pack a lot into life in those 47 years.

The shop lay mysteriously empty and derelict, unchanged for all of 45 years, as did all the other shops on that side of Toynbee Street. Yet, all around was gentrification. As years went by, his son Alan would occasionally be in the area and stop by the shop. Nothing ever changed and he would just take a look for old times sake. One day he drove past the shop, having not been by for years. It was strange because the sign 'Conway' over the shop-front that he had known for years had fallen away with just his Dad's name 'Frank' seemingly etched into the wall above the shop-front glass. Almost like him saying 'it's all right, I'm still here'.



Years later, in 2012, Alan's daughter Emily came across an exhibition of photos of old shop fronts of the East End, taken in 1988 by Alan Dein, an oral historian and radio broadcaster. The exhibition was organised by Tower Hamlets Council in Stepney, East London. Frank's shop was amongst those he had snapped (see picture left). They were later to learn from Alan Dein that the shop had been first registered as 'Frank Warehouseman' in 1948. So, it seems the original signage 'Frank' had revealed itself when subsequent signage had fallen away. A puzzle had been resolved. Emily was inspired by what she was discovering about the grandfather she had never known and produced her painting 'Frank' (see below); a collage that brings together the colours of the old shop-front with images of the advertisements Frank ran in the press.

The shop remained derelict, whilst in the rest of the area development was all around. Only in 2010 did the shop come back to life as a refurbished office.

Toynbee Street is now being redeveloped and that row of shops is going. Each last one right up to Frank's old shop will fall to demolition. But Frank's old shop lies just outside the redevelopment plan and will survive, the outside all done up now in trendy designer grey paint. Of course, for the family, the shop will still always be 'Conway Automatics'.



Another tale with a small twist: Exactly a year and a day after Frank dies his son Alan discovered an audio tape of him in conversation with a business associate. This is the only sound recording of him that exists. He had bought a radiogram, a large piece of furniture back then. As ever, looking to new things, unusually it housed a reel-to-reel tape-recorder. He would have bought this machine around 1960. At the beginning of the tape he says "I'll show you this 'gram". Its new exciting equipment; it's got a tape-recorder. "We'll record our voices, see how it sounds. It's just like a record". On the tape, which last 17 minutes, he talks about a game that is some kind of simplified version of Roulette. It is a recording of an East End deal. He was always on to something new. Whatever happened to this new game remained a mystery. Until one day when his grand-daughter Emily googled Frank's name; together with his shop address; and up popped Billboard Magazine dated January 26<sup>th</sup> 1963. This copy of that American trade magazine for the entertainment industry had details of a trade show being held in London, with a very brief interview with Frank about this very game that he was exhibiting. So, yes, this 'new' game was for real as revealed through a chance Internet search, nearly 50 years after the event.



When he died the business died with him. The goodwill was sold for a modest sum to a second cousin who carried on the name Conway through the 'Conway Trading Company', but the business was effectively completely different and was dealing in hosiery. His daughter Linda, just twenty at the time, joined the business for eighteen months to help with the transition. There was a move in the late 60's to 15 Toynbee Street and that business closed down in the late 70's. The last remnant of the business, the Sunday stall in Petticoat Lane, lived on until Mimi passed away in 1990. Through the years she, Linda, Alan and Linda's children all worked that old stall.

Another story typical of him: Frank went to a health farm in Tring, Hertfordshire where he met an American businessman; and he and Mimi were invited to a party at the Dorchester Hotel. Who was staying there? None other than Mohammed Ali for his second fight with Henry Cooper. Apparently Mimi went up to Ali and said she was "one of his greatest fans"; and she was; although she had never seen a boxing match! Frank had taken Alan to see his first fight with Henry Cooper in July 1963. Just like Frank; the only boxing fight he had ever attended saw Cooper land the most famous punch in British boxing history, when he knocked down Cassius Clay, as Ali was then known. He and Mimi had also met the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi; the Indian mystic the Beatles had become involved with. This must have been 1966. Frank being Frank, he ended up at some exotic spiritual ceremony conducted by the famous Yogi. At some point Mimi says to Frank "I think we better get out of here" and they made their excuses and left. They also visited spiritualist churches. Mimi was keen; I don't know what Frank made of it. Can spirituality mix with a little gambling? Well, Frank visited casinos too and had 'a system'. He always seemed larger than life even though he stood just 5 foot 3 inches tall with dark tight black curly hair; maybe those Romanian genes? He never did go grey (see picture of Frank outside his shop in the early 1960s).

Like us all he was of his time and place; and so unsurprisingly fully conversant in Yiddish. He was not religious. From what he started with, which was with next to nothing, he achieved a lot.

He led a helter-skelter life in business. It was insecure, physically demanding in the markets and emotionally demanding too; he inhabited a tough part of the sharp end of the free market jungle, right there in the streets of London's East End. As ever, in business and outside of it, he always looked to the future and the latest trends; to the next big thing.

**January 2014**

---

Toynbee Street photograph by Alan Dein used with permission from Alan Dein