

A Mile in My Shoes

a memoir by Shoeless Joe Jackson

By Don I. Waldo

Book One: Prologue

I don't know how well y'all know me, or if you even know me a' tall. Can't rightly expect that you would, after all – I was born more than one hundred years ago on a muggy July evening in 1887. Yessir, that seems like an awful long time ago to me, too. Then again, I hear there's been a lot of fuss made over me lately – over whether I took money from gamblers; whether me and seven of my teammates helped throw the World Series of 1919; and, of all things, whether or not I should be in that base ball Hall of Fame they got up north in Cooperstown, New York. Well, let me say right now and for the record, if any of y'all have come to these pages lookin' for my say in such matters, you've come to the wrong place. You see, that trial and the three-ringed circus it turned into was somethin' I put behind me a long, long time ago.

Then why am I here today tellin' you this? One reason: I'm here to set the record straight. Not about the money. Not about the scandal. And I especially didn't come back here to talk about such nonsense as a "hall of fame." No, sir, I'm here to talk about me and my early dealings with baseball, before that mess I've already made mention of. Now it may sound like an entirely pompous proposition, but I can't think of no other way to put this whole mess to bed so's maybe I can get a bit of rest myself. You'd be surprised how fierce our ears set to burnin' around here whenever you folks take to speakin' ill of one of us. And by "us" I am of course referrin' to the many other fine souls who occupy this side of eternity. Anyhow, the way I figure it, if folks is gonna fret so over the likes of me, they should at least know at little bit about the man they're frettin' over. Like they say: You should never judge another man until you've walked a mile in his shoes.

-- Joe Jackson

The Three Rs: Reparations, Reconstruction & Restoration

Howdy. What's wrong? Y'all look like you ain't never seen a ghost before. Well, get used to it, cause I ain't a leaving here 'til I've said my piece. 'Sides, chances are I may be the first spirit to darken your doorstep, but I can practically guarantee I won't be the last, as there's plenty more of us where I come from. So, you ready? I know I am. I been waitin' a mighty long time to give my side of things.

My given name was Joseph Jefferson Wofford Jackson (I must confess that I never much cared for that "Wofford" part, but it was the name my parents blessed me with and I reckon it would be downright disrespectful were I to fail to report it here) and I come into this world on the sixteenth day of July, eighteen hundred and eighty-seven. Now those of you kind enough to have read my prologue will realize that I have just repeated myself, but before anyone goes to markin' this misstep off as evidence that I have lost what's left of my mind – I would remind you that I am speakin' from *beyond* the grave and therefore am but a kindly spirit, a mere haint (or ghost as Yankees like to call us) and do not have a mind to lose. No, sir, I have repeated this simple fact because it has been misreported a hundred times over by the very folks whose job it is to know better. (Which is why I can hardly blame the good folks over at Woodlawn Memorial Cemetery in Greenville, South Carolina, for getting it wrong on my tombstone!)

Now before I go to setting the blame for this misunderstanding squarely on the shoulders of the boys in the press, I reckon I should start at the beginning – where the confusion first began. You see, I never received a proper birth certificate because I never received what you might call a proper birth. What I mean to say is, I wasn't delivered by some fancy baby-doctor in a hospital room what smelled of rubbing alcohol and sickness.

No, sir, I was born to a strong willed, God-fearing woman by the name of Martha Ann Jenkinson Jackson in a one-room shanty; and the only soul by her side that day was my father, George Elmore Jackson. Now before you go to feelin' sorry for me, you should know that I arrived at a time and place when most folks couldn't afford kids, let alone cater to 'em.

You see, even though the War Between the States ended twenty-two years before I was ever born, the misery, despair, and hard times it brung to folks in our neck of the woods remained. Sure, folks had tried to get back to the business of living; trouble was – there was no business left for them to get back to. Cities and farms all had been burnt to the ground and what them Union boys couldn't put a torch to, they demolished: factories, bridges, rail-lines... everything. This left folks who weren't in a position to own land or run the government – common folk like my ma and pa – with nothin' to do but try to eke out a livin' sharecroppin' that scorched earth for enough food to feed their families.

I reckon what I'm tryin' to get at is that we was poor. We couldn't afford a doctor, a hospital or even a birth certificate. But, like Maw-Maw was fond of pointing out, "a fish doesn't know it's wet." Course, all of this poor-mouthin' still leaves us with the matter at hand: How do I know exactly when I was born? Simple. My momma told me. I'd wager that if there's one person on God's green earth who'd recollect the day little Joe Jackson arrived in this world, it ought to be the woman who did the hard work.

Now, I've already made mention of how the South was ravaged by that war, but it weren't just the war that was to blame for our struggles. No, sir, Mother Nature put the Southland through some mighty difficult trials and tribulations herself – sendin' storm after storm our way 'til dang near everything Pa had planted was washed up or blown

away. It didn't help none that that sorry stake of land we was tendin' was run by a "crazy old fire-eater" who, according to my pa, "wouldn't lend you a glass of water if your hat was on fire." Now, I always knew my pa to be a prideful cuss, so as important as it must have been for him to provide for Ma and me, it was probably every bit as important for him to keep his dignity whilst he was doing it. I'm here to tell you, that landlord and my pa was always gettin' into it over one thing or the other. Trouble was, when it came right down to it – Pa was beholden to that fella for the few potatoes, green beans, and okra he managed to pull out of that hard red clay. It's my guess Pa had to swallow that famous pride of his more than once just so's Ma and me could have something in our bellies before we went to bed of an evenin'.

I reckon it come as no surprise to my ma when she returned from morning worship one Sunday (Pa didn't tend church regular as he claimed he just didn't have the constitution to sit in any one place for more than twenty minutes without taking a case of the "fidgets") to find her husband holding a fistful of bloody rags to his face with one hand, yours truly cradled in the other, and every last bit of our meager belongin's loaded onto the back of an old covered wagon. "Let's go," was all he said as he hoisted us up onto that rickety old buckboard; tethered our one milk-cow, "Tessy," to the back rail; and then set us on our way down the Cherokee trail... In all the years that followed, my pa never made mention of what it was set him off that particular day, but the scar that run the length of his right sideburn and disappeared beneath his handlebar mustache told Ma and me more than we ever cared to know.

Four days later we made it to Pelzer, South Carolina. Now, as towns go, Pelzer weren't much, but it did have the one thing my folks needed fiercely: jobs. You see, a

fella by the name of Captain – “Cap’n” for short – Smyth had just built the biggest textile mill in the entire United States, and he needed some warm bodies to tend to it. Workers was to get a dollar a day. (I know it don’t sound like much, but to folks who are starving – a dollar can go a mighty long way.) Better still, each family of workers would be provided something most folks in those parts had never even seen before: a new home. Granted the houses was still the property of Cap’n Smyth, but they was rented to the workers for the reasonable sum of fifty cents per room. Each and every one come complete with running water, a fireplace, a kitchen stove and even a bathroom on the back porch with a pull-chain commode (a fairly new-fangled device in those days.) Trouble was, news of the Pelzer hiring had spread far and wide. By the time we showed up, hundreds of hungry but able-bodied folk from as far away as Georgia and Tennessee was already waitin’ in line to sign up – way ahead of Ma and Pa. But seein’ as how they didn’t have much choice, my parents both signed up and, lo’ and behold, they both got jobs. Not only that, two of Pa’s brothers found jobs and moved their families, including Maw-Maw, down from the hills, too.

Now whether this fortune was a blessin’ or a curse all depends on whose side of the tale you adhere to: Ma, God-fearing Christian woman that she was, always thanked Jesus and gave the Good Lord credit for the blessings that come our way; whilst Pa, on the other hand, was always cursing God and making mention of the things we didn’t have. So it should come as no surprise when I tell you that Ma ended up with what most folks consider one of the better jobs in the mill – inspecting cloth in the cloth room – whilst Pa ended up in the bowels of that place tendin’ to the engine that ran every piece of machinery in the entire mill. It was so hot, muggy, and full of chaos down there in that

boiler room that in the beginning, folks would talk about how righteous it was that a blasphemer like ol' George Jackson should find himself in such an unholy place.

The bad mouthin' ended pretty quick-like after Pa had a run-in with the bosses. You see, there come a month when the mill "accidentally" forgot to cut paychecks on time – three Fridays in a row. So, Pa, not being one to suffer fools gladly, decided to take matters into his own hands -- "accidentally" shuttin' the engines down each time he did not find a check in his box by 10am on Friday morning. Now I know what you're thinking, but the truth of the matter was the superintendent didn't dare fire Pa. Though he may not have had the privilege of wealth or a fancy education behind him, my pa was blessed with the ability to recognize the advantages that he did have. In this case, Pa knew that he could handle those temperamental steam engines better than any man alive; so shutdowns of a day or two were nothing compared to the time it would take to train another willing soul to tend to them engines as good as Pa. After two straight weeks of wholly unproductive Fridays, them bosses – and folks, in general – soon realized it didn't pay to speak ill of George Elmore Jackson.

So, all things considered, I reckon that mill was both a blessing *and* a curse. One thing's for sure: I'll never forget the first day my pa drug me down to that place...

Linthead



It was so early in the morning that the sun hadn't had a proper chance to rise. Didn't seem to make no never mind to my pa, though. He'd made the half-mile trip down to the mill so many times in the past five-and-a-half years, I reckon he could've found his way blindfolded.

"Remember what I told ya, boy. I hear you been actin' up – I'll tan your hide but good," he warned as he hurried me by the hand down the narrow, red-clay footpath.

"Yes, sir," I promised, though I admit I was more concerned with how I could barely feel the stones beneath my feet thanks to my new shoes. They was high-top Brogans – a big deal in them days – and the first pair of brand-new shoes I ever owned. *Mill work, I figured, must be of high-importance for me to rate a pair of brand-new shoes from the deal.* Even after we'd reached the clearing and started along the railroad tracks,

my feet felt good as new. *If'n I'd traveled this far in my old shoes – or worse, barefoot – my feet would really be singin' by now*, I thought to myself. In my brand-new Brogans, not even the jagged granite stones and splintery cinders along the tracks was off limits.

We approached the mill from the backside, down to the docks where hundreds of bushels of cotton was hauled in one side whilst yard-after-yard of blue denim thread was shipped out the other. Made you wonder if the entire country weren't running around with brand-new britches the way cloth got sent out those doors. The mill was now in sight and the closer we come, the bigger that four-story fire-bricked building got. When we arrived there was a giant of a fellow standing with his hands on his hips – which was no small task, since his rear end looked to be twice the width of his shoulders – like he'd been waiting on us for half the day now.

“You're late,” he said in a voice deeper than any I'd ever heard before.

“Left the house same time I always do. Reckon it can't be more than half-past the hour,” my pa replied.

“I'd heard you was one to back-sass, Jackson,” said the man who stood about six-foot-two and weighed close to three hundred pounds – a good percentage of it being located in his posterior region. “I won't tolerate no gruff from you or your little *linthead* young' un,” he continued as he glared down his nose at Pa and me. “Understood?”

My father was barely five-foot nine inches tall and never weighed more than a hundred-sixty pounds drippin' wet, but he wasn't about to back down from no one.

“Last I checked, you weren't my bossman,” Pa said as he moved in so close to the big man that I was sure the two of them had an *idée* what the other had ate for breakfast that mornin'. “And as far as my boy Joe here is concerned,” Pa continued as he inched

even closer and stared back even harder, “I can assure you he won’t give you no trouble... Ain’t that right, boy?”

Unfortunately, I had took to noticing them shoes again and wasn’t ready for the question, but the box Pa put to my ear woke me up soon enough.

“Yes, sir!” I said, not quite sure what I was agreeing to.

Pa returned his attentions to the big man: “Now if you’ll pardon me, I’ve got to get to going or I *will* be late.” Layin’ his hand against the big man’s chest, Pa brushed him aside and made his way up a narrow gravel footpath that led to the front of the mill.

So there I was, at a time in life when most youngsters was bein’ dropped off on the doorstep of their local schoolhouse into the waiting arms of a kindly schoolteacher, I was being left outside the loading docks of Pelzer Manufacturing Corporation in the sole custody of one “Foreman Terry,” the orneriest bossman Pelzer Mills ever knew. Soon as my pa was out of sight, that big-ol fella grabbed me by the collar and lifted me right off the ground so that my face was closer to his than Pa’s had been (fatback and biscuits with sorghum in case ya’ll are wondering) before he growled, “Whilst you’re in my mill, *I’m* the only daddy you got. Understood?” I wasn’t exactly sure what he meant by that statement, but the way he said it and the fact that my Brogans was dangling a good three foot off the ground told me there was only one way to answer.

“Yes, sir,” I said.

After he put me down, Foreman Terry hoisted open one of the big freight doors, and I scrambled onto the dock behind him. When my eyes finally made their way clear of his ample backside, I was struck by a world of sights and sounds no six-year-old could ever imagine existed. Row-upon-row of giant machinery was laid out across a shiny,

hardwood floor as far as my eyes could see – some sets pounding up and down like jackhammers, whilst other sets beat out a clicky-clack motion like the wheels of a locomotive. All together, that pounding was so fierce that it rattled me from the tips of my teeth all the way down through the soles of my new Brogans. And the air, the air around me was so thick with cotton dust that it smelled – no, it *tasted* like I was chewin’ on hot, oily rags.

“Here!” Foreman Terry yelled as he handed me a broom. “Just sweep up until I figure out what else you might be good for!” he yelled again for good measure before disappearing in a swirl of cotton dust. Course, I was so small and those infernal machines – looms, spinners, weave machines and the like – was so big, ol’ Terry never did find much else for me to do – least wise not right off.

So there you have it: before I ever hit a base ball (it was two words back in them days) or shagged a single pop fly, I worked. I worked from six in the morning ’til six at night, Monday through Friday. And on Saturdays, just for good measure, I worked four more hours. All told, I worked some sixty-four hours doing nothing but coaxing piles of cotton from one corner of that big ol’ mill to the other. The trick was to keep those piles from blowin’ down to nothin’ whilst you kept out of every one and every thing’s way. Now, the idee that such noise and nonsense could come to numb a body’s mind and soul over time should go without saying. But me being my father’s son, I took a case of the fidgets right off and from day one I began to study on ways to escape Foreman Terry and the rest of that dusty, noisy, God-awful mill.

Champ

Textile mills are generally set near a powerful creek or river, as that is where they draw the water needed to power their steam engines. Pelzer Mill was no exception, being set along the banks of the Saluda River as it was. During my time there, I spent a good many of my scheduled eight-minute breaks (and all of my unscheduled ones) casting stones into her muddy waters and dreaming of a life beyond the drudgery of the mill...

“That ain’t no way to do it!” a voice from behind me boomed.

Now normally when I’d hear a voice down here, I’d assume it was ol’ “Lardbottom” (as we lintheads had come to know the good Foreman Terry) hollerin’ at me for one reason or another. Course, in that case, I’d just scale the bank and scramble back inside before his addled brain could even settle on a punishment. (Ol’ Lardbottom seemed obliged to assign me a new punishment with each offense.) Though this voice was just as deep and just as commanding, it was different somehow, and instead of chasing me away, it froze me – made me want to stay and hear what was to come next. I turned to see a young man no more than seventeen or eighteen and about the size of my pa scrambling down the bank towards me like some wild billy-goat. Before I knowed it, that wiry fella had grabbed my hand and was showing me how to do something most folks would assume come natural.

“Follow through with your throw and snap your wrist down, ’stead of leaving it hanging out there like some Bertha-Mae.”

Now I don’t know if he thought I was stupid, slow, or just plain daft, but whatever his reason – that fella seemed to have the fool notion that I didn’t know the proper way to

throw a rock. He turned loose of my arm and focused his attentions on the hundreds of granite stones that had fallen from the nearby trestle.

“Here, let me show you,” he said as he grabbed a stone about three times the size of the one I’d been scaling. “You see that Coke-cola bottle wedged between them rocks yonder?”

“You mean *way* down yonder?” I asked.

“That’d be the one,” he said. Before I could even train my eyes on the bottle in question, that stone whizzed past my ear like a rifle shot –

Poww!

In the blink of an eye, that Coke-cola bottle had exploded into a thousand tiny pieces – peppering the water like falling buckshot. As I watched the pieces drift lazily to the bottom, the sun catching off them like diamonds, it felt for all the world like I was in some sort of dream.

“The name’s Champ, Champ Osteen,” he offered as though it was a name I should know.

“Joseph Jackson,” I replied with a newfound respect.

“Good to know you,” he said, as he squeeze my hand like a vice. “Now it’s your turn.” The stone he tossed my way was dang near as big as the one he’d just hurled.

“What you reckon I should aim for?” I asked, though any fool could see there was another Coke-cola bottle only a yard or so from the one he had just obliterated.

“That other one yonder.”

“Oh.” I was just about to make a big ol’ fool of myself when a bigger, older fool beat me to the punch –

“Jackson!” It was Lardbottom Terry himself and, Lordy, was he steamed.

“Who the hell said you could come down here, boy?”

“I did,” Champ piped up as he stepped into the clearing next to me.

“Mr. Osteen?”

Come to find out, that fellow *was* somebody. James Champlin Osteen was the nephew of the superintendent of nearby Piedmont Manufacturing, Josephus S. Osteen, not to mention the star shortstop for the Piedmont Rangers – a mill team known across the state as the “Champions of South Carolina.”

“Master Jackson and I are quite involved in his base ball lessons at the moment. I assure you, I will return him to you as soon as we have finished here.”

“Yes, sir,” was all he dared manage before he turned his considerable tail and headed back inside.

“Mr. Osteen?” I asked, once I was sure my bossman was out of the picture.

“Call me Champ, Joe.”

“Champ... What’s ‘base ball’?”

Being as how I never had much time for play (except once a year on the Fourth of July when the Scottish Games come to town), I had never been properly introduced to the game of base ball that Champ was referring to. (Turns out that war did bring one good thing to the Southland. You see, whenever they was allowed recreation time, Yankee prisoners would organize games of base ball amongst themselves. Of course, as soon as some curious Confederate boys learnt the game, a slightly more “civilized” war began to rage on the base ball field instead of the battlefield.)

In the years to come at Pelzer, ol' Champ continued to school me in the finer points of the game whilst he burnt up base paths from Asheville to Augusta, G-A. Still, even though Champ said I was a "natch" (meaning I was a natural-born base ball player) and took an interest in my learning the game early on, neither one of us made much more out of it that – playing and practicing for nothin' but the smile it brought to both of our faces. Matter of fact, it weren't until Champ's uncle Josephus pulled some strings and got him made Recreational Director of Cap'n Smyth's newer, bigger "Brandon Mill" that base ball began to amount to anything more than just a game for either one of us.

Brandon Mills

By the turn of the century, the winds of change were a-blowin'. Twelve years in the same spot had to have been some sort of record for my pa; then again, you can't rightly blame the man for taking another case of the fidgets considering the family's latest predicament. You see, that old mill house that used to be more than spacious enough for the three of us had come to be terribly cramped, as Ma had just provided Pa with his sixth son, Luther, and seventh child overall. I had taken to sleeping on Maw-Maw's old quilt on the floor agin the back door so as not to wake the young'uns if nature was to come calling during odd hours of the night. What's worse, with Ma pregnant again, the living situation in that little four-room cottage was about to become downright intolerable. So when word reached Pa of a new mill with homes what could accommodate growing families like his, the Jackson clan was on the road again – though this time we didn't have so far to travel. Brandon Mills was just down the road a piece in West Greenville, South Carolina. The best part about all of it, at least as far as I was concerned, was the idee that I would soon have my base ball mentor back, or at least that's what I reckoned.

Evidently, organizing a ball club from scratch is no easy venture, and the more dedicated Champ became to getting the new "Brandon Braves" up and running, the less time he had to spend with me. Without Champ around to bail my sorry behind out, base ball was fast becoming more trouble for me than it was worth. It all came to a head one day as a gang of us lintheads gathered for a rousing game of "mill ball" in one of the weave rooms temporarily shut down for repair. When they shut these rooms down, the maintenance crew would also cut the lights off to save money. This made conditions

perfect for a rogue game of mill ball. There was still enough light inside the room for us to see one another, the ball, and even the other mill folk in the adjoining rooms, but it was prêt-near impossible for anyone outside the room to see in.

“C’mon, Jake, is that the best you got?” I shouted as I stood beside the doffing can lid we used as home plate and tried to get my point across over the pounding of the looms in the room next door. I had the fire in me for sure, and at twelve I was already near as tall as my pa. Bad part was, I didn’t weigh more than a buck and loose change.

“I got more than enough for your narra behind, Jackson!” Jake Archer hollered back as he scratched his toes across the tape we’d laid in place of a pitcher’s rubber. At fifteen, Jake was a good two hands taller than me and at least sixty pounds heavier, so for me to stand in there and jaw at him from the batters box was one of the dumber things I did in all of my life. But since the base ball we was usin’ that day weren’t nothing but a tightly wound ball of scrap yarn, I figured I could take my chances.

“Are you daft? You couldn’t sneak a pitch past me if’n I was as slow as ol’ Lardbottom,” I bragged, slicing the air with a picker-stick like it was the thirty-eight-ounce cut of hickory Champ used to wallop his legendary home runs. Now the way we was carrying on, you might take the notion that me and Jake hated one another but nothing could have been further from the truth. I won’t say that Jake and me was best friends, as I don’t reckon there was time enough in them days for best friends. Still, whether we was sweeping floors or stealing away to gig frogs or play mill ball, me and Jake did spend prêt-near as much time together as brothers. This ain’t to say I weren’t close with my own kin, cause I was – especially Preston McDavid or “Davey” for short.

At seven, Davey was nearest me in age and most times he clung to my side like a kudzu vine. But at the moment, he was standing along the third base side just busting to make a play on his big brother. As little as he was, Davey already had the reflexes and the arm to rival boys twice his age. If'n I were to hit one his way, odds were, I'd never make it to first base. Course, I wasn't about to let him know that.

“Look alive Davey, this one's headed your way!”

Jake had had just about enough of my jawing and he rifled a pitch my way. I took my best cut and got lucky. I reckon that ball of yarn was wound pretty tight cause it screamed past my brother's outstretched hands and carried clear past an entire row of weave machines behind him.

“Ow!”

I knew that cry almost as well as I knew my own ma's calls for supper. I also knew what was about to follow –

“*Jackson!*”

Lardbottom Terry. Dad-blasted if that good-for-nothing buzzard hadn't sniffed me out all the way from Pelzer! Actually, as my luck would have it, “Foreman Terry” had made the transfer over to Brandon shortly after Champ and me. To make my life even more miserable, Lardbottom had managed to get himself promoted to what they called a “bailiff,” and now his sole responsibility was keeping the peace for all of Brandon Mills as well as the entire surrounding mill village. Course, if you'd asked me, I'd have argued his sole responsibility was hounding me to death.

“Jackson, I know it's you, and when I catch you this time I'm gonna have your hide!” he barked.

Having no desire to rekindle our relationship, I did like everyone else and high-tailed it out of there. I was a good three rows away, hidden inside an empty doffin' can. Whilst I was covering myself with cotton trimmings, another familiar voice caught my attention –

“*Joe!*”

It was Davey and from the sound of things, he was in trouble. Bailiff or not, I wasn't about to let Lardbottom Terry keep me from helping my little brother.

“I'm coming, brother!”

Reckoning that Davey had likely followed my lead, I clamored out of that drum and backtracked through the rows and alleyways that had led me to my hiding place...

“Davey?”

“Joe?” What I saw then made my legs go weak and my heart skip a beat. Davey was trying to get away from one of them looms what, from where I stood, looked for all the world like it wanted to eat him alive.

“Davey, hang on!” I yelled as I raced over to him... The laces. The rollers on that loom had caught hold to them and was reeling Davey in like an old catfish. I grabbed my younger brother by the arm and held on for all I was worth. *Damn!* Try as I might, I couldn't keep his little body from sliding across that hardwood floor towards –

“Joe!”

It was Jake. Soon as he saw our predicament, he locked his cable-strong arms under mine and tugged with all his might. At once we was at a standstill – a tug of war between that powerful machine and two wiry teenage boys with poor Davey's life up for spoils. For a moment, it appeared we might be getting the best of the situation, but then

that infernal machine started to whine – a thin trail of smoke rising up from its innards as it wound the lace tighter. All of a sudden, the three of us was yanked forward in a lurch, pulling my little brother within inches of its workings.

“*Help!*” my brother screamed in a voice that would stay with me ’til the day I died. Right about then, when things looked their worst, something happened that set me more towards my mother’s God-fearing ways than anything that happened before or since: that shoe fell off and in an instant it was gone – hunks of sole and mangled strips of leather spit out the other side and onto the floor like pieces of used chewing gum.

I commenced to hug my brother close to me; squeezing him so tight he could barely breathe the sigh of relief the three of us felt at that moment. Course, it weren’t no time before that feeling was stripped away.

“Uh, hum,” Lardbottom Terry said, clearing his throat as he stood lording down over us in that superior way of his. “You boys is in a world of hurt,” he threatened, as if he could concoct a fate worse than the one we just escaped from.

Second Chances

“Well, have you put any more thought to why what you done was wrong?”

In my foolish mind, admitting to my pa that I had done anything wrong would have been the coward’s way.

“I didn’t think so,” he said as he took that leather razor strop of his down from its familiar place on the wall. “One of these days, the Lord is going to show you the error of your ways; until that day, I reckon it’s up to me to put a stop to your shenanigans.”

Shutting the door behind him, my pa turned and ordered me: “Now drop them britches.”

“But Pa, we was on our break!”

“You nearly got your brother killed! And now we got to go an entire month without a paycheck from either one of you. First born or not, you’ll not be taking food from this family’s table,” he said as he brought his leather strop down across my backside time and again.

The beating I took that day convinced me of one thing: I was getting out of that Godforsaken mill come hell or high-water. Only thing I hadn’t figured out was how. So come the following Sunday, I skipped out on preaching and stole away to study on my predicament. Although Brandon was one of the few mills not set beside a river, it did have a pond out back where I would often clear my head by skimming stones across her still waters – seven skips being my record at the time. But my current situation, I soon realized, was going to require some more powerful medicine. Even though the new ball field they had just plowed on yon side of the Brandon dump weren’t much more than a glorified cow-pasture, it, along with a few of the base balls I had recently dredged from the pond, provided just the elixir I needed. No, sir, there’s nothing more relaxing than the sound of hickory meetin’ horsehide. Unfortunately, all I had for a bat was that old picker-

stick – *Crack!* – and the sight of it splinterin’ into a hundred pieces didn’t provide near the comfort I was looking for.

“*Dang it!*” I said to myself. *If being poor ain’t about the worst thing in the world, I don’t know what is.* I commenced to searchin’ through the brush for a good sized log of knotty-pine or maybe a half-rotten oak branch that I could snap off. Just when I was about to give up and go home, a familiar voice startled me to attention.

“What you looking for?” It was Champ, and he was toting that old, scuffed war bag of his – the one his uncle had give him after the war was done.

“What business is it of yours?” I wisecracked, resuming my search for a decent “bat.”

“None, I reckon. None, a’tall.” he said as he began to dig into that bag. I was curious as a polecat, but I wasn’t about to let him know it. In fact, my distracted state had gotten me tangled in a patch of briars and as I was trying to free myself when Champ hollered at me again. “I don’t reckon you’d know a body’d have use for one of these?” I looked up to find Champ brandishing the finest base ball bat I had ever laid my eyes on. I tore lose of those brambles like they wasn’t even there and sprinted to Champ’s side.

“Can I hold it?” I asked, salivatin’ as if he was holding the last catfish at a Sunday cookout.

“Her. Can you hold ‘her’,” he corrected. “Objects of beauty and grace are always referred to in the feminine gender,” he explained in the educated way he sometimes did.

Soon as he handed me the bat, I could see he was right. A finer work of craftsmanship I had never seen. *She* was made of hickory and her ash-white surface was

polished to a high sheen. She was solid, too. Solid as a rock and darn near as heavy. No way I was going to admit that to Champ, though.

“She’s a beauty,” I remarked. “Who made her?”

“Fellow by the name of Captain Martin. He runs the streetcar over in town,”

Champ answered. “He fashions all my bats.”

“Is this one mine?” I dared ask.

“I don’t know, kid. That’s over forty ounces of timber you’ve got a hold to. Take a real man just to heft it, let alone swing it,” he said.

“I’m a man. Be thirteen soon,” I boasted.

“How soon?”

“July. July 16th,” I said as a matter of fact. Course, I don’t reckon it was my birth date so much as it was my size twelve shoes what sold him on the idee that I’d someday be able to handle such a monstrosity.

“I’ll let you keep her on one condition,” he said as I looked on, waiting to hear just what I’d have to do to earn such a prize. At that moment, I’d have done prêt-near anything – even if it meant working more hours in that mill.

“New season’s coming up. Gonna need a batboy.”

I knew there was a reason I came to the ball field today, I thought. A brand-new bat and the opportunity to spend my spare time around the game I was fast growing to love. Course, me being my father’s son, I had to push matters.

“Would I get my own uniform?”

“I’d have to clear it with the Cap’n, first. They’re his purse strings we’d be drawing on. But I don’t reckon he’d object none.”

“Can I catch batting practice, too?”

“Sure do ask a lot for a fellow who just got a brand-new bat for nothing.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I don’t know; thirteen’s kinda young to be playing against grown men.”

“I’m prêt-near as big as you, and you more than hold your own.”

Champ knowed he couldn’t argue with that line of thinking, since I was every bit as tall as him, though not quite as stout.

“What about bat-blindness? You ain’t bat-blind, are you?” he asked, trying to scare me away. You see, Champ knew I’d been at that championship game last year and saw first hand the terrible consequences a catcher can suffer when he loses his ability to track the swing of a bat. The catcher for the Augusta team lost his nerve early in the contest, but instead of coming out – he tried to tough it out. Big mistake. That poor fellow got his head split wide like a ripe honeydew. Last I heard, he was picking tomatoes for some sharecropper over in Anderson County because he didn’t have the wits about him to do anything else. That’s the funny thing about bat-blindness, either you have it or you don’t. And even if you don’t have it to start, don’t mean you can’t catch it somewhere down the road. If you do, you’d danged-well better give up the ghost and try-out for another position.

“Don’t you worry bout me,” I shot back, even though at the time I had no idee whether I was bat-blind or not, since I didn’t have a lick of experience behind the plate.

“I reckon we got a deal, kid,” he said.

We shook on it, and I was happier than I’d been in a good while. Trouble was, that happy feeling didn’t last long before it was interrupted by an aggravatin’ little voice

in my head that kept telling me there was something I was missing – something bigger even than what had happened here today.

Apprenticeship

As I approached my teenage years, I begun to grow like a weed. Of course, this meant that my duties in the mill was likely to grow just as fast. “Bee”, the new foreman I was assigned to, was a fat, slovenly fella who wore the same pair of bib-overalls – with nary a tee shirt underneath – from the first day I met him. I knew they was the same because the snuff stains below the lowest of his three chins never moved, just got bigger and wetter with each passing shift. Needless to say, the man stunk to high-heaven. Now you might think that’s a bad thing and for the most part you’d be right, but having a bossman whose stink arrives before he does can work in a fella’s favor at times. Unfortunately, this wasn’t one of those times.

At the moment I was stuck in a freight elevator and damned to travel four floors down with Bee, a dozen doffing cans stuffed with carded cotton lapping, and one mighty powerful stink. Luckily, I caught a good breath when we first got on at the fifth floor and had somehow managed to hold it all the way down to the first. I don’t have to tell you; I heaved those heavy doors open before the elevator had come even with the floor and hopped out of the elevator faster than you’d think was humanly possible. (Amazin’ what a body can do when he’s got the right inspiration.) As I stood on the landing bent over, hands on my knees and mouth wide suckin’ in air like a hooked catfish, my latest bossman hollered some instructions out to me over the roar of the machinery.

“After you finish totin’ these doffin’ cans over to the spinnin’ room, I won’t you to go see Mutt and his boys down in the machine shop. You’ll be working for him for the next little while.”

"I gotta take orders from him?" I wondered out loud between gulps of breath. Far as I knowed, Mutt Rollins weren't nothing more than a mechanic (workers responsible for keeping the machinery in the mill up and running) and I couldn't understand why I'd have to take orders from the likes of him. Sure, the job itself might have been a rung or two above my linthead position (there weren't nothin' lower 'cept for janitor, and that position was prèt-near always filled by a colored man), but it weren't exactly a position of authority, least wise not outside of the machine shop.

"You are a natural born back-sasser, ain't ya Jackson?" Bee snapped, bringing his body and his odor as close to me as his considerable belly would allow.

Here we go again. Lord, can't anyone make a threat without they stand directly in front of you?

"Listen, boy, you'll do what *he* tells ya, 'til *I* tells ya different." I tried to back away from him, but, unfortunately, the heels of my Brogans was already hangin' off the edge of the dock with the ground a good five feet beneath me. "Ya git me?" he asked.

"Yes, sir," I said as my eyes begun to tear up. It was a darn good thing I hadn't eat breakfast that morning.

"Then what are you waiting fer? Git!"

I didn't need a second invite. I squeezed past that belly of his, grabbed the two doffing cans nearest me, and dragged them behind me as I high-tailed it across the hardwood floor. By the time I'd finished with the cans and made it down to the machine shop, it was well past noon. Even so, the fellas I had to meet was still there. Matter of fact, they didn't look to be in no particular hurry to leave. The machine shop being one of the few places where a body could hear himself think, those boys was carrying on and

looked to be having a grand old time. There were crumpled sheets of waxed paper and wadded up poke-sacks strewn across the tables, whilst each and every one of those fellas was kicked back on his stool with a bottle of Coke-cola in his hand.

“Where you been, boy?” was the greeting I got from Mutt, the bossman over five or six other mechanics. I reckon he was in charge for no other reason than he was about ten years older than the rest. Don’t get me wrong; he was a big enough fella – at least as tall as me and about twice as wide. He just didn’t seem to have the cut of a man that should be leading other men.

“Working,” was my short but honest answer.

“Well, you’d better get used to that!” he said in a smart-alecky way that made the others chuckle. For reasons unbeknownst to me, the notion of work seemed foreign to these boys. “You ever fix a loom before?” Mutt asked.

“No, sir,” I replied.

“Well, I reckon it’s high-time you learned. What do you think, Hyder?”

Hyder Barr, a teenager just a few years older than me, was tall and lean with dark, wavy black hair he kept greazed to a high sheen. But when I tell you he was slick, I ain’t referring to his hair. He gave me the once-over before he gave his opinion, “Looks like a natural-born loom fixer, if you ask me.” Now this tore that pack of fools up so bad, Coke-cola shot out of half their noses and the other half ‘bout fell off their stools laughing.

“Alright boys, you hold down the fort whilst I go show young Jackson here the ropes,” Mutt said as he motioned for me to follow him. Before leaving, he turned back to his bunch of cronies and, singling out Hyder Barr, hollered “Hey, Hyder, none of those ‘cigarette breaks’ of yours – not unless you plan on filling the rest of us in on *all* the

details.” This seemed to get a bigger rise out of those boys than Hyder’s comment had. Those fools whooped and hollered and threw their wadded up poke sacks at us as we hurried out the door. Mutt was grinnin’ from ear-to-ear as he lead me through that dusty, noisy weave room. Course, I didn’t have no idee what was so funny. Three hours and six loom repairs later, I still hadn’t found a single thing to laugh about.

Besides the boiler room, the weave room is probably the most inhospitable room in the mill. Of course the dust and the noise was bad, but the mugginess was even worse. Because it got so dusty, there was several sprayers what looked like showerheads screwed into the water pipes running the length of the ceiling. When the dust got too thick for the workers to even see, a floor boss would open them sprayers up and spray a mist of water into the air. The water would attach itself to the dust, and then the dust would get heavy and fall to the floor – clearing the air for a little while. Trouble was, often times that wet dust would fall into the looms where a long rod called a “picker-stick” was pushing shuttles back and forth, weaving the cloth. More times than not, that wet dust would clump together into big ol’ clods. So when the picker-stick come along and slammed the shuttle agin that clod, the shuttle would get knocked out of its grove and go flying out into the alley. Now I can’t say as I’ve ever been clobbered by a flying shuttle myself, but I did bear witness to such an occurrence a time or two. (Course, I always did my best to hold my laughter ’til I was sure that person weren’t seriously hurt.)

“You about got the hang of it?” Mutt hollered.

“I reckon, ” I said, wiping away the lint that had started to cake on my forehead.

“Good, cause I need a break,” he said as he got up off his stool.

What he needed a break from, I couldn’t rightly tell you.

“Pack up them tools and meet me back downstairs,” he ordered.

I did as I was told and got down there as soon as I could, not because I was anxious to see what else he had for me to do, but because it was a good twenty degrees cooler and a whole lot dryer downstairs. Soon as I walked into the cool of that machine shop, I was hit by one of them moments when you could swear you was witnessin’ the same thing you’d witnessed once before. But this one wasn’t hard to figure: Not a one of them mechanics appeared to have moved so much as a muscle since the time we’d left them there nearly four hours ago.

“You boys working hard?”

It was Cap’n Smyth. He had come down from the big house on the hill and was standing there in front of me with the newly appointed superintendent of Brandon Mills, Josephus Osteen (Champ’s uncle), standing at the ready beside him.

“Hardly working,” Mutt said loudly and proudly.

Mutt Rollins, you have just cracked your last stale joke, I thought to myself. No mill hand could get away with back-sassin’ a floor boss that-a-way, let alone the captain of every mill in two counties AND his super.

“Good to hear. Wouldn’t want anyone spraining something they might need come Saturday,” the captain boomed as he slapped Mutt on the back, the three of them carrying on like they was old friends. “I do still have a mill to run,” Mr. Osteen chimed in with a more serious tone. “You given any more thought to what we discussed?”

“Been working on it all morning,” Mutt replied. “Mr. Osteen, Mr. Smyth, I’d like you to meet my new *apprentice*, Joe Jackson.”

“Jackson? Don’t I know that name?” the captain asked me.

“George Jackson is my father, sir,” I replied. “He tends to your engines.”

With that the captain looked over at Josephus, then turned back to me. “Oh, yes, George Jackson. Fiery little fellow. Got quite the temper on him,” the Cap’n said, more to his super than to me.

“He’s a hard worker, though,” Josephus added.

“Absolutely. Mighty hard worker,” Cap’n Smyth said finally.

“Sir,” Mutt chimed in, breaking the odd silence. “I figure if we train Joe and a couple more linheads like him to do the grunt work whilst me and the rest of the boys provide the know-how, we can keep this ol’ mill of yours running like a well-oiled machine,” Mutt said as though he’d just invented the wheel.

“Efficient allocation of available resources,” Cap’n Smyth said. “I like it.”

“Sir?” Mutt asked, as if the captain was speaking another language.

“I think what Mr. Smyth is saying is,” Mr. Osteen chimed in, “your plan will give him the biggest bang for his buck.”

“Precisely,” Cap’n Smyth said as he looked around the room at the others, “providing, that is, you and the rest of your boys come through for us on Saturday.”

Before Mutt could give his answer, Hyder Barr stood up and crowed, “All due respect, sir, but with me on the mound and Mr. Osteen’s nephew calling the shots, them Piedmont boys don’t stand a chance in holy hell.”



Batboy

That first week of practice as batboy and substitute hind-catcher for the Brandon Mill's Braves confirmed what I had already begun to suspect: Mutt Rollins and his boys was all teammates. That's why they was able to pawn their work off on me and loaf around like they owned the place. I learnt right then and there just how important textile league ball was. It was powerful important – not just for us wore-out millhands starving for entertainment, but also for the Captains and other bigwigs looking to place high-dollar wagers on the outcomes. I reckon by wagering that his team – the best team his considerable money could buy – agin some other well-heeled fellow's team, an owner could feel like he had won a battle himself. If you ask me, those boys was wastin' their time, not to mention their money. I ain't never won a battle in business – and I've won

my share – that gave me near the satisfaction I got from the many hard fought victories I earned in base ball through the years.

At first my discovery got me to feeling pretty low when I thought about all the extra work I was about to have heaped on me. But after I'd studied on it a night, I realized what that little voice inside my head had been trying to tell me all along: base ball was my ticket out. Not just out of the mill, but also out of the poverty our family had struggled with since the day I was born. By hook or by crook, I was going to have to find some way onto that team. Learning to make myself useful to the team was a good place to start.

Once I'd learned all there was to learn about being a batboy, Champ gave me a chance to try my luck behind the plate. As luck would have it, I weren't "bat-blind" a'tall, which meant I'd get my chance to show my stuff during practices. When Mutt was up to bat, or when he didn't show up a'tall, Champ penciled in yours truly as the Brandon Brave's acting hind-catcher.

Saturday Specials

Every Saturday home stand for the Brandon Mill's Braves of 1901 was cause for some of the biggest celebrating ever seen this side of the Scottish Games at Pelzer (and those didn't roll around but once a year on the Fourth of July.) But Opening Day was the biggest by. Not only did the visiting team happen to be our long time rivals, the Rangers from nearby Piedmont, they was also the group Champ had left behind when he came to Brandon. I wouldn't be exaggerating much if I told you every last soul from two counties was at that game, from the Captains on down. More than an hour before the game was scheduled to start, the grandstands was slam full. Jake was there, standing elbow-to-elbow in a section marked "Colored Fans Only." (In case I haven't already mentioned it, Jake was colored and in them days, colored folk weren't allowed to sit next to white folk. I know: it didn't make a bit of sense to me, neither. Those folks worked every bit as hard as the rest of us all week long, didn't seem right they should be treated any differently come Saturday afternoon.)

Those who couldn't find a grandstand seat laid blankets out along the foul lines – careful not to spill across the freshly chalked lines onto the field, which, after a whole lot of hard work, had been transformed in the weeks leading up to the event into something much more than a glorified cow pasture. Children of all ages straddled branches from every nearby tree limb, their legs dangling in rhythm to the tunes put out by the *Brandon Mill's All Brass Band*. Why, even those folks too old, feeble or cheap to fight the crowds watched from their porches. And if their porches didn't happen to have a view, then they watched from a neighbor's porch. Yes sir, prêt-near everybody in Brandon Mills found a

way to root on their hometown Braves past the hated Rangers from Piedmont... Well, everybody ceptin' my pa, that is.

In trying to escape mill life hisself, Pa had opened up a sawmill. Trouble was, sawing timber didn't bring in enough money to allow him to quit Brandon altogether. Pa tended to the boilers on Saturday mornings, but his Saturday afternoons was spent running that saw. (Sundays was out of the question, since – as Ma was quick to point out – only heathens and preachers worked on the Lord's Day. I know what you're thinking, but even if he didn't have much use for the Lord and his rules, my pa wasn't about to shame his wife and family by admitting such a blasphemous thing.) Course the fact that Pa weren't at the game didn't make no real never-mind to me no how, since the rest of the Jackson clan was always there: Ma, Davey, Jerry, the twins, Ernest and Early, Lula Mae and even little baby Luther. Besides, Pa was right, there weren't many fathers who would cotton to the sight of their first-born fetching sticks for a bunch of grown men.

Course, fetching bats wasn't all I had on my mind that day. No, sir, my attentions was on how I might get into that game as a player. Trouble was, the buzz going through the crowd was so loud, it was hard for a body to keep his attentions focused on anything else. And by the time our boys took the field, those folks had worked themselves up into quite a frenzy.

“Give ‘em hell, Champ,” was the most common battle cry heard round the ballpark. You see, even though he had spent the past three years belting the horsehide around the yard for nearby Piedmont (the team most folks judged the “Champions of South Carolina”), Champ Osteen was the property of Brandon Mills now. Champ was no longer just my idol; he was the idol of every red-blooded boy in Brandon. The women

folk loved him too, but I don't reckon for near the same reasons. Matter of fact, I recall many a grown woman fainting dead away from a simple kiss to the back of her gloved hand. Til my dying day, I don't reckon I ever rightly understood what that sort of worship was all about. Course, such adulation meant that most of the men in town didn't just want to be *like* Champ, they wanted to *be* Champ.

"We gonna give them Piedmont boys what for, ain't we Champ?" yelled some peculiar looking little egghead who, judging by his spectacles and lily-white skin, must have had a desk job in one of the offices above the company store. Course, there was no "we" about it, but Champ never seemed to mind it when little bookworm fellas like that took credit for what he did mostly on his own. In fact, Champ usually went right along with their idle boasting, sometimes even adding a boast of his own.

"If their tails ain't tucked, I'll be shucked," he crowed back at the man before he took up the shortstop position.

Thanks to one of the finest diving grabs I've ever witnessed, Piedmont's first at-bat went off pretty much without a hitch. Hyder Barr took a couple of pitches to settle down, nearly taking the head off their number three batter who Hyder claimed was crowding "his" plate. Pitchers can get mighty possessive over home plate, and rightly so. Any hurler who can keep a hitter "uncomfortable" at the plate has already won half the battle. Timid fellows will step away from a pitch instead of into it, whilst those who dig in too far back will have to lunge – most times missing a pitch they might otherwise been able to handle. But, like I was saying, we got to our half of the inning pretty quick with Champ flagging down the only hard-hit ball – a worm burner that appeared for all the

world to have already shot the gap between Champ and the second baseman – and snatching it out of the air like a bullfrog snatches a horsefly.

The Piedmont hurler was a throwback. He was still pitching in the underhand style preferred by those fellas who first took up the game. Generally, underhanded pitching gives a fellow a bit more control, though it takes much more practice to get any kind of speed from such a pitch. This fellow seemed to have the speed part down, but his control was a bit suspect. He had already walked the first two batters, so by the time Champ came to bat there was a runner on first and second.

“Knock the hide off her, Champ!” I said as I handed him his favorite bat, ol’ Lucky Lucy.

“It’s the only way I know, kid,” he said as he strode to the plate. Champ took his sweet time getting there, too, stopping along the way to soak in the cheers of “*Champ! ... Champ!*” He even grabbed a handful of dirt and worked it into the handle just to catch a few more: “*Champ! ... Champ!*” If’n it had been anyone but our beloved Champ Osteen, the umpire, “Wild Bill” O’Laughlin, a giant of an Irishman who stood looming behind the Piedmont pitcher, would have called him out at the plate by now.

When he finally did step into the batter’s box, he stepped out again near as quick – taking some more time to set his left foot (Champ batted left but threw right) at the very back of the box. I didn’t see how they could get any louder, but when Champ made his final adjustment by giving a tug to the crotch of his britches, the crowd went nuts.

“Champ! ... Champ! ... Champ! ... Champ!”

Now you might recall that Champ was our manager as well as our shortstop. This being the case, Champ had a responsibility to us as our leader to set an example. If you

ask me, the show he was puttin' on at that poor pitcher's expense wasn't exactly the work of a model ballplayer, leastwise not a manager. Judging by the fastball he proceeded to fire at the back of Champ's skull, I'd have to say that pitcher agreed with my assessment of the situation.

Champ hit the dirt, but he was up and rushing the mound before his jersey had a proper chance to get dirty. Both benches were quick on our best player's heels and before I knew it, the two teams were going at it in the center of the diamond. Just as the crowd was getting restless and about to storm the field themselves, the sleek, ebony barrel of a pistol rose up out of the center of all that mess, aimed at the blue-sky heavens above –

“Ka-Pow!”

It may not have been the shot heard round the world, but everybody in that ballpark sure took notice – especially when the report from that forty-four-caliber revolver rang off the walls of the nearby mill and carried across the distant foothills... Cap'n Smyth immediately sent for Bailiff Terry, but by the time ol' Lardbottom got down to the field, matters was settled and both teams had returned to their respected dugouts.

Wild Bill and his loud friend had brought an end to the ruckus soon enough, but before the game could commence, both teams had to take inventory. Piedmont had lost two men: their starting pitcher and a reserve pitcher who had jumped head first into the pile, only to be met by a fist full of knuckles. Champ was lucky. Only Mutt Rollins, the man on the delivery end of those bare knuckles, was the least bit worse for wear.

“Fraid you're gonna have to sit this one out, Mutt.”

“It ain't that bad, Champ. Really. Maybe one, two at the most are broken.”

“Mutt, I’d sit Nap Lajoie hisself down if his mitt looked half as bad as yours.”

Turns out, I was even luckier.

“Who you gonna get to replace me? Ain’t another hind-catcher on this team,”

Mutt pleaded, desperate to keep his job. Unfortunately for Mutt, his were the only shoes I stood any chance of filling, being as how I’d been catching batting practice for more than a month now. I reckon one man’s misery can be another man’s fortune.

“Jackson!” Champ hollered as he took first base, the game resuming where it left off – with runners on all three bases.

“Yes, sir?” I said, throwing the bottle of sweet-oil down and giving my glove a good *smack* with my balled up fist.

“Grab some lumber, kid, you’re going in.”

“Yes, sir!”

Back in them early days, I was fast and light as a waterbug so, naturally, Champ would have liked to put me in at leadoff. Trouble was, Mutt, low and powerfully built as he was, had been our clean-up batter. So there I was, thirteen-year-old Joseph Jefferson Jackson, heading to the plate with the responsibility of three men on base in the biggest game in the short history of the Brandon Mill’s Braves.

“Hey, who let the kid in the game?”

“Yeah, I didn’t pay to watch no sandlot ball!”

At first I did well to ignore all the commotion the sight of me seemed to be stirring up. I hefted that forty-eight ounce cut of hickory Champ had given me onto my shoulder and started for home plate without a care in the world. I even stopped along the way to grab a handful of dirt and work it into the handle just like Champ had done.

(Contrary to popular belief, this part of a batter's ritual does serve a purpose. Well, at least in my day it did. You see, back then there was no such thing as "batting gloves," so we'd work sand into the grip so as not to develop blisters on our hands.) Course, thinking that crowd would take to the sight of me mimicking their hero was probably my first mistake.

"You don't belong up there, kid!"

"Yeah, why don't you go home and have your mammy wipe the snot from your nose!"

I wasn't Champ and that crowd wasn't about to let me forget it.

"Hey, Champ, why don't you give the kid a broom so's he can sweep the bases clean!"

Course, they was just words and nothin' much different than those I'd heard a thousand times before, so I can't rightly say them catcalls was what had begun to unnerve me so. No, sir, I'd have to say the most trying part of the whole experience was the idee that I just might fail. What if I was to strike out, then what? How many chances would Champ give me before he pulled the plug, before he figured he'd made a mistake and he was right to begin with: thirteen was just too young for a boy to be playing base ball with a bunch of grown men. Worst of all, what if I failed and had to go back to workin' – I mean really workin' – in that dad-blasted mill? That last thought worked me into such a lather that the walk to home plate felt like it took a good day-and-a-half. Everything and everyone around me seemed to be moving in slow motion and the butterflies in my belly was swarmin' like locust.

“Batter up!” Wild Bill ordered, having little patience for any shenanigans from the likes of me.

I stepped into the batter’s box and tried to dig into the dirt with my back foot when all of a sudden my head went swimmy and my legs trembled weak –

“Time!” Champ cried out, trotting towards me after Wild Bill give him the nod.

“You okay, kid?” Champ asked as he took me aside.

“Yeah. Sure. I reckon,” I lied, trying to catch my breath.

“You want I should take you out?”

“No!” I hollered, still not rightly sure I could get control of whatever had come over me, but darn sure I wasn’t going back to a life as a mill hand without a fight. I gathered a breath and assured Champ –

“I’ll be alright.”

From the look on his face, I’d have to say Champ didn’t believe a word of it. Unfortunately for him, Champ didn’t have much choice in the matter since I was the only other fellow besides Mutt who could be trusted behind the plate. (It ain’t so much that the catcher position is that demanding, it just takes a good enough throwing arm to reach second on a steal and a good enough head on your shoulders to keep a pitcher in the game. No, sir, the real trick to playing behind the plate is, like I mentioned before, staying out of the way of the bat at all times.) Champ made his way back to first base whilst the folks in the stands become even more restless –

“Hey, Champ, how much the Cap’n greeze ya to throw this game?”

It got so bad; folks took to throwing everything from wads of chewing tobacco to old rotten potatoes in my direction (tomatoes wasn’t quite in season, or I’m sure I’d have

seen a ripe one or three of those.) Somehow I managed to get my breathing back under control, but for how long, I couldn't be sure. I stepped back into the batter's box and set to twisting and digging my foot into the hole Champ had left behind when I heard a voice that, in looking back, may very well have saved my life.

"Hit it where they ain't, Joe!" called a lone voice from somewhere behind the backstop. They was the first words of support I'd managed to hear since I come to the plate and I had to see where they come from. Soon as I turned to look in the grandstands, I heard the whir of the pitch but couldn't even get my head around before the ball *smacked* into the palm of that catcher's mitt.

"*Strike!*" Wild Bill called.

"Dang it!" I said, more to myself than anyone else. I stepped out of the box. Before I'd let that pitcher sneak another one by me, I had to know who it was – sides my family – that was pulling for me. I glanced real quick-like toward the grandstand and directly into the prettiest set of baby blues I'd ever come across... her round, ruddy face aglow from the afternoon sun. She was a tiny little thing, but she wore an elegant, pink ankle-length dress and a matching wide-brimmed hat that made her look to be a young woman of at least 15 or 16... My head started to spin again, but this time it didn't have nothing to do with base ball.

"Look where they're playing you," the girl urged, holding the brim of her hat with one hand and pointing toward the outfield with the other.

Dazed and confused as I was, I managed to pull my eyes away from her pretty face and take a gander at the outfielders. She was right. Every last one of those boys was playing so far in they was practically standin' in the infield. Looking back, I can't say as I

blame them. I don't reckon the sight of a nervous, string-bean of a fellow toting a bat as big around as he was would put the fear of God into many a ballplayer. But to me, their playing in so close was about the biggest insult anyone could have paid me. After all, hitting was the one thing I knew I was good at. Catching, throwing, even running – all those things took time to learn and developed with practice. But batting, batting come easier to me than falling out of bed in the morning. Sure, Champ would try to show me some things like stepping into a pitch so's I get everything behind it, or keeping my elbow up so's not to pop out, but the funny thing was, all those things seemed to be accounted for in my natural swing. Walloping balls was something I was born to do; all I needed was the squeaky voice of an angel to remind me of that fact.

“Belt it to the tall and uncut, Joe!” she urged some more.

Almost like magic, the butterflies settled down, my head cleared, and when I stepped back into the batter's box I knew exactly what I would do with the next pitch.

That pitcher must have sensed I was ready to put a hurtin' on anything he threw my way because he tried to put the next pitch directly in my ear. I hit the dirt hard. Behind me, the hind catcher laid out just to keep the ball from getting past him.

Of course my teammates all sprang to attention in my defense, but Wild Bill had other plans – “Call off your boys, Champ. I'll handle this,” he ordered, heading Champ off at the pass with a look as soon as he took his first step toward the mound. Champ wasn't intimidated, but he did as he was told – signaling to the fellas in the field and on the bench to just hold tight. Everyone in the ballpark watched Wild Bill walk deliberately over to the Piedmont pitcher and say something to him, but I was just close enough – and he was just loud enough for me to catch a bit more of the drama than most.

“You serve that lad any more chin music and you’ll be the one singing Soprano,” he warned in a thick Irish brogue that got worse the madder he got.

At first that pitcher didn’t look as if he was going to pay Bill any mind; but then, Wild Bill leaned in closer...

“Ya got me?” Bill asked.

A glint of sunlight caught my eye and my attentions moved south. I watched with eyes wide open as Wild Bill wedged the barrel of his forty-four against the Piedmont hurler’s crotch. I reckon the feel of cold steel pressed against his unmentionables was all the convincing that fellow needed.

“Yes, sir!” he yelped.

“Good.” Bill replied. Then he turned to the rest of us and yelled, “*Play ball!*”

I chuckled nervous-like at it all and prepared to step back in. As I rubbed another handful of dirt into the handle of the bat, I remembered the little blue-eyed angel sitting behind me in the fifth row. I looked back and there she was, pretty as a picture. She gave me a smile and once again I knew what I had to do. This time I did it –

Whack!

Like I said before, ain’t nothing like the sound of hickory meetin’ horsehide. Woo-wee, I walloped that ball so good the only muscles those boys out in the field had cause to move was in their necks as they watched it sail past. She carried on into the mill junkyard, landing with a –

Clang!

– agin a length of rusty stovepipe and finally coming to rest a good four hundred feet from home plate.

As I rounded the bases, that crowd went as quiet as a sinner in Sunday school, dutifully tossing coins into my brothers' hats as they ran by (it was tradition in them days to reward a ballplayer who'd just hit a home run or made a tremendous play by "passing the hat" through the crowd.) But the moment I crossed home plate, they exploded in celebration. Champ, Hyder and the rest of the boys snatched me up and hoisted me onto their shoulders – which they really didn't have to do since I was already on cloud nine – and carried me back to the dugout whilst chants of "*Joe! ... Joe! ... Joe!*" rang like music to my virgin ears.

Katie

Having all but secured a position on the mill team (I still needed permission from my parents before it could be made official), I set out to thank the individual most directly responsible for my recent success.

“Katheryn Wynn, but you can call me Katie,” said the little blue-eyed girl as I helped her down from the bottom step of the grandstand.

Now, I know what you’re thinking. You’re thinking a girl I’d just met couldn’t hardly have been as important to my newfound success as Champ and, right off, I’d be inclined to agree with you. But if you study the matter a bit more, you should come to see it the way I did – that even though Champ gave me the opportunity and the Man Upstairs was most likely responsible for my talent, that little blue-eyed angel gave me the courage to succeed.

“Miss Katie...”

“Yes?”

“Miss Katie, do you like to drink?”

“Excuse me?”

“I mean: would you like a drink? A Coke-cola. Maybe an ice-cream float. Would you like to get a Coke-cola or an ice cream float with me from Harrison’s?” I asked. “My treat, of course,” I said, showing off the pile of money I’d just been awarded.

“I’d love to.”

Harrison’s Drugstore & Sundries was a local establishment that weren’t much different than any other drugstore in them days. First thing in the door was a lunch counter with about six to eight stools (perched on one of them stools was ol’ Lardbottom

Terry, but I did well not to pay him no never-mind) running opposite the storefront window that looked out onto Pendleton Street (Brandon's main street in them days.) On yon end was the druggist's pickup window, and directly across from it was a knotty-pine bench. The big pot-bellied stove for heating the place was back there, too. I reckon to keep sick folk from catching their death whilst they waited for their medicine. We took a seat at one of the booths in the tiny dining room, as far away from Lardbottom as I could get.

Katie ordered a Coke-cola from our waitress, Mrs. Harrison (her husband was the druggist as well as the proprietor of the establishment), while I ordered, "My usual."

"That was a whale of a game you played," Katie said. I knowed right then today's game weren't the first she'd ever seen. Being that "whale" was a term used strictly by ballplayers and close fans of the game. Still, it didn't answer every question I had about this girl.

"How'd you know I could get the ball past them fellas?" I asked.

"I've seen you do it before."

"How? This is the first game I've played."

"Not in a real game. I've watched you practicing with the team. Our house is across the way, on yon side of the railroad tracks," she explained. "I can see the ball field from my window."

"You watch us practice from your room?"

"I haven't missed a one since the season started," she said. "I follow the major leagues, too. Do you follow the major leagues?" she asked, her blue eyes twinkling as she stared up at me.

“A might,” I said, though it weren’t precisely true. Being around ballplayers as much as I was, it was next to impossible not to have heard talk of the major leagues, but, for the most part, I paid little attention to the base ball goings on outside of Greenville County.

“Who’s your favorite?” she asked, continuing on the subject.

“Nap Lajoie, I reckon,” I returned, naming the only name I could recall being bandied around the clubhouse from time-to-time.

“*Really?*” she squealed, as if she’d just won the church raffle. “Napoleon Lajoie is my all-time favorite major leaguer, too. The very idea that a player could hit 426 for an entire season just knocks my sox off.”

Mrs. Harrison brought over two tall glasses of Coke-cola, setting the one with the lime wedged at the top in front of me. “Yep. 426,” I said, not knowing what I could add to such an impressive statistic.

“Can you read?” she asked, as she watched me squeeze a bit of lime into my Coke-cola.

“No. I mean, sure, I can read. I just don’t care to. It hurts my eyes.”

“That’s funny. I read all the time and it never bothers mine.”

“Well, that’s because my eyesight is so keen at far distances that I get headaches when I try to focus in on something close,” I said, not knowing how I could expect anybody to believe such a ridiculous story.

“Huh!”

I reckon ol’ Lardbottom weren’t fooled. But, evidently, the one person I wanted to believe me, did...

“I reckon that does make sense,” Katie said to my surprise. “I know you can track a fastball like nobody I’ve ever seen. Anyhow, I’ve got this article about Nap that you might find interesting,” she said, carefully extracting a worn strip of newspaper from the ruffles at the brim of her hat. “I could read it to you if you’d like.”

“That’d probably be best,” I said, sparing her from the truth of my sad story for at least another moment or two. I could tell from the looks of her and the way she talked, she would have no trouble whatsoever deciphering what was scrawled on that finely creased piece of paper. It was easy to tell that this delicate creature spent her days book-learning in a big brick schoolhouse, not slaving away in some sweaty old cotton mill.

“This season, hard-charging Napoleon Lajoie says he is out to capture base ball’s most co-ve-ted title: the elusive triple-crown. The Athletics fiery second baseman intends to, as he puts it, ‘once and for all’ put to rest the argument over just who is the greatest hitter in the game today.”

“You read nice. Kinda like the sound a bluebird makes in the morning before the sun comes up.”

“Thank you,” she said, her cheeks blushing red.

“You know, everybody’s saying Champ’s gonna get the call up to the major leagues real soon.”

“You think he’s good enough?”

“Are you joshing me? He’s the best ballplayer in all of South Carolina... Maybe even Georgia and North Carolina, too.”

“Not for long.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I think you’re the best – even better than Champ. Why, someday you’re going to be better even than Nap Lajoie.”

“No. ... You really think so?”

“I know so.”

“Stop your dreamin’, kid,” Lardbottom snorted, as he stood at the register looking over and *down* on us. “Ain’t no linthead nowhere ever made anything of himself. And girlie,” he added, addressing Katie as he paid his bill. “You’d do yourself a favor you steer clear of the likes of him. Linthead is all he is. Linthead is all he’s ever gonna be.”

Those words cut deep. I could feel my face run hot and my eyes begin to well with tears. I couldn’t see nothing but that man’s big behind as he exited Harrison’s and made his way to the bailiff’s wagon parked outside, but I knew all the same that big, fat, lard butt had a smile on his face from ear to ear the whole time he was hauling his considerable carcass onto that little buckboard. I don’t know who I felt sorrier for, me or the springs on that buggy.

“Don’t you listen to him,” Katie urged, placing her soft hands on mine. “My ma says a body can do anything they set their mind to.”

Katie’s words were comforting, but they still didn’t take all the sting out of Lardbottom’s cut.

“Is that good?” she asked, referring to my Coke-cola (later on, when other colas like Pepsi and RC come out, we just referred to them all as “dope”) and lime.

“Nothing better,” I said. Then, before I could offer her a sip myself, Katie leaned in and took a big *slurp* from my glass.

“Umm, that is good,” she commented before she let loose a good-sized –

“*Burp!*”

Of course she excused herself right off, but her actions was still enough to set me to wondering –

“How old are you?”

“I’ll soon be ten,” she said, wiping her mouth with her sleeve.

“How soon?” I asked, already afraid to hear the answer.

“... Next year.”

“Next year? ... I gotta go.”

“Thanks for the drink,” I heard her say as I skedaddled out the door and hitched a ride on the nearest trolley *cling-clanging* its way down Pendleton Street.

Momma's Boy

Joining up with the Brandon Braves made all the sense in the world. At the time, I was earning three dollars and ninety-six cents per week. This was a good dollar more per week than most adults were earning for the same exact “linthead” duties. You see, in them days, textile mills was famous for paying children more than adults. This way they forced entire families into the mill – keeping their supply of workers high and the wages they paid out low. But three dollars and ninety-six cents per week was still a far cry from the six dollars and sixty cents a week I’d be collectin’ as one of Mutt’s boys. I also had to consider the additional two dollars and fifty cents worth of Cap’n Smyth’s money Champ was offering for every game I played in. As it stood, Mutt was still the Braves starting hind-catcher; but with a little more coaching, Champ figured he could use me as a utility man – behind the plate, in the outfield, or even as a pitcher if the situation called. No doubt about it, nine dollars and ten cents was a lot of money to be paid just to loaf around all week and play ball on Saturdays. There was only one problem: Ma didn’t see it quite that-a-way.

“But I thought you said they’d commenced to training you on the looms,” she asked, stirring a batch of hominy with her favorite wooden spoon.

“Yeah, so’s *they* can play base ball. If base ball’s more important to them, why shouldn’t it be for me?” I said, trying to sneak a taste of those buttery grits before –

“*Whack!*” – my hand caught the business end of that spoon.

“I don’t know; but what I do know is loom-fixer is one step away from carpenter and carpenters make good money,” she said, wiping off the spoon before she commenced to stirring.

“They don’t make near as much as base ball players, especially good base ball players.” I shot back, rubbing my knuckles to sooth the pain. “Champ got free room and board and more’n forty dollars a month last season just for playing ball. Now that he’s managing, you can bet they’re paying him even more.”

“I’m sorry, Joseph, I got my heart set on the day my first-born becomes a floor boss,” she said, taking an iron skillet down from the shelf to make a cake of cornbread.

“But, Ma, you know they ain’t never gonna let no uneducated linthead like me become floor boss. Besides, I don’t want to be no bossman. I don’t want no part of that mill less it’s on the base ball field.”

“You hold your tongue, Joseph Jefferson Wofford Jackson,” she scolded, clutching that skillet by the handle and waving it in front of my face as she spoke. “*That mill*’ has been the answer to many a prayer in this house, and you should thank the Good Lord everyday that he’s provided us with such a blessing.” I don’t reckon I’d ever seen Ma so fired up, least-wise not whilst she was fixing breakfast. Now, I’m not claiming Ma would have resorted to violence to get her point across, but I will admit to taking a step back out of range of that skillet before I made my next bold statement. (Folks had always said I got my size and strength from my ma and I was in no particular hurry to find out if I got my swing from her, too!)

“It ain’t a blessing,” I said. “Everybody in the family is working ‘cept for the babies, and we still barely make enough in one day to make it through to the next. No, ma’am, there ain’t but one man that mill is a blessing for and he don’t even set foot in it but once a month. I’m tired of living my life for the man in that big fine home up yonder on the hill. It’s my life and I don’t fancy living it for nobody else.”

“You’re talking crazy, son,” she said, sounding all the more like she was about to lose her patience with me. But right about then, the last person on earth I would have expected to defend me and my position stood up and spoke with a strength and conviction I’d never heard before.

“The boy’s right, Martha. In fact, he ain’t never said a thing that made more sense. We work in *his* mill. We live in *his* house. Our children play in *his* streets. Our cow sleeps in *his* stable. They send us to *his* store to buy *his* goods. When we get sick, or hurt, we’re sent to *his* hospital.” At that, the rest of us nodded in full agreement, especially Davey who’d seen more than his fair share of the Brandon Mill’s infirmary. Then Pa turned to me and continued preachin’, “We are arrested by *his* constable, and tried by *his* magistrate.” Finally, he looked over at the rickety old rocker Maw-Maw used to sit and sew those fine quilts of hers in before he proceeded to bring home his point: “And when we die, it’s *his* cemetery they come to bury us in.”

Amen. It had to have been the finest, and by far the longest, “sermon” of any kind my father had ever preached.

“I have final say in this house and as far as I’m concerned, the boy can play,” he said firmly, laying his hand upon my shoulder. “Good luck, son,” he added before he placed his hat upon his head and started out for work. Through the tears in my eyes, I saw my father clearer than I ever had that day. Sure, he was a prideful man, but when pride’s all you got, maybe it ain’t so bad.

Brandon Braves



With my parents' blessing and Champ's guidance, I became the Brandon Brave's utility specialist (that's me standin' smack-dab in the middle, seven places in from the left or the right). Champ had me play prêt-near every position on the field at one time or the other. I began my fledgling career behind the plate, starting in place of Mutt Rollins and batting out of the number three position. Champ said it didn't matter if I was as fast as a jackrabbit, there was no way he was going to waste that sweet-swinging "big ol' Betsy" of mine in the leadoff position with nary a soul on base. But my catching career didn't last long. Funny part was, it weren't a bat that cut short my career behind the plate.

I was catching Hyder Barr in practice one day when the bottom fell out of one of those high and tight fastballs of his. Danged thing dropped so hard and so fast it snuck under my glove and caught me square in the facemask I had fashioned for myself. As Pa had pointed out many a time, I weren't much of a machinist; consequently, that mask give way at one of the spot welds I had made and let the ball on through – breaking my cheekbone and leaving me with a long, thin scar where one of the iron bars had dug in just above my eye. In order to keep playing, I had to strike a deal with Ma: from that day

forward, I'd not play behind the plate again. True to my word, I never once started another game at the catcher position in all my forty-some-odd years of playing ball.

After catching, Champ tried me on the mound. I was a decent hurler, too, as I won about three-quarters of the games I appeared in – including two no-hit shutouts. But, after having let loose a wild pitch that broke the arm of an opposing batter so bad I seen the bone protrude through the skin, I called an end to my pitching career my own self. I reckon my best position, the one most attune to my natural abilities – quick legs, cannon arm, eagle eye – was left field.

Naturally, Champ was there to school me in the finer points of the position: keep the ball in front of you at all times, even if it means playing deep; it's always easier and faster to run forward than it is to run backward; *always* follow the ball into your glove, no matter how routine the fly ball; and, finally, the idee that you should never get too much air under the ball when making the throw in, because, as everybody knows, the shortest distance between two points is a straight line. It also cuts down on the possibility of having the ball get away on you. Eventually, I felt so at home at the left field position and got so good at it that some naturally right-handed hitters took to batting lefty just so's they could avoid hitting to my side of the field. Champ would often counter such a move by having the centerfielder and me switch positions, which would give me the range to track down any ball, no matter where it was hit. Soon, ballplayers from every team in the league began referring my side of the field as “the place where triples go to die.” As good as I may have gotten out in the field, it was my God-given ability to wallop the ball that drew folks from across the foothills and parts of the high-country.

After Champ left for the big leagues for good in 1904, fans looking for the next “Idol of Brandon” turned their attentions toward me. Now I won’t say I took Champ’s place in the hearts and minds of “Brandonites,” but I will admit that I did my best to oblige; knocking the hide off so many balls at such a steady pace (I led the league in home runs and was the reigning batting champion every year from 1902 through 1906) that the good folks of Brandon took to naming my hits. “Blue-darters” was balls hit on a line so hard and so fast folks would swear they saw blue flames a-tailing them. But my patented shot was dubbed the “Saturday Special” – a long, looping home run like the one I hit into the junkyard that first Saturday (thanks in part to young Miss Katie Wynn.) As I recall, my hits weren’t the only thing they hung fancy names on.

With Champ and “Lucky Lucy” moving onward and upward to “the Show”, it was time two new names were placed on the local marquee. Once my teammates noticed the dark, ebony shine ol’ Betsy had begun to take on (I’d been soaking her overnight in a tub filled with a bit of water and a bunch of tobacco leaves), it was only a short matter of time before “Black Betsy” was born. Now, all that was needed was someone to share top-billing with her. “Candy Kid” was what the boys on the team called me at first, mostly ‘cause I weren’t yet old enough to chew tobacco and had to suck on gumdrops, jawbreakers, and my favorite, Tootsie-Rolls, instead. To the local fans, I was the new “Pride of Brandon,” but to the folks beyond the confines of West Greenville I was fast becoming known as the “Carolina Confection.” Believe you me, these new monikers had a nice ring to them and were all a heck of a sight more respectable than “linthead.” (Well, ‘cept for one. But I ain’t ready to discuss that nickname just yet.) Yes, sir, all the attention was really putting wind behind my sails, but it weren’t the thing what drove me.

Since Kathryn Wynn was still too young to court proper-like, the greatest love of my life at that time was base ball. From the time I got up in the morning 'til the time I said my prayers and laid my head to rest of an evening, base ball was on my mind. In fact, even when I dreamt, base ball was usually the main feature playing in my head. Now I can't rightly say why this was so, but my suspicion is that it was a combination of things. To begin with, the game was taught to me. Save for millwork and chores around the house, no one had ever taken the time to teach me anything. Champ took that time, and for that I always did my best to make him proud. Then there was the added pressure put on me by church-goin' folk like Ma who not only said that I had a talent for the game, but went so far as to claim that it was a gift from the Good Lord himself. (I'm no head doctor, but I'd say that's a pretty big burden to put on a twelve year old. After all, what fellow in his right mind looks to disappoint the Man upstairs?)

Of course, there was one more reason I was obsessed with the game, and I reckon it was as good or better than any I've mentioned so far. Base ball was fun: blowing a fastball by a batter for a called third strike, then watching him slink back to the dugout like he has no idee what just happened; fielding a long fly ball on the run, then whipping around and firing it back on a rope to nail an unsuspecting runner dead to rights, no questions asked; catching another hurler's best pitch with the meaty part of Black Betsy and yanking it so hard that the poor fella's chin drops to his chest while his outfielders crane their necks and can do nothin' but watch as it sails into the outer reaches of the tall and uncut. Yes, sir, all these thrills and more were possible every time I laced up a pair of spikes. Oh, and then to come to find out I could make a pretty decent living at it, too? Well, heck fire, why would anyone in his right mind want to do anything else, ever?

Hired Hand



I spent the better part of six glorious seasons as a Brandon Brave until, in the latter part of 1906, the Victor Mill's Wildcats came-a-calling. I wasn't at all eager to leave Brandon, but the folks from Victor was offering a full dollar and fifty cents more per game over the two-fifty I was making at the time and I couldn't afford to turn it down. Sure, some folks called me a traitor, but there was still nine mouths tolled – with

one more on the way – to feed back at the Jackson household; what’s more, Pa still hadn’t earned enough to leave the cotton mill life behind him. The way I saw it, the additional money could do nothing but help. Then, later that same year, I received yet another lucrative offer from a semi-professional team calling themselves the “Near Leaguers.”

The Greenville Near Leaguers was run by a life-long jock by the name of Lawrence “Lollie” Gray who, once he’d graduated from nearby Clemson University, had been left an athlete without a team. With some financial backing from his family, ol’ Lollie gathered up a bunch of other recent college graduates who’d been left in the lurch just like he had and started his own team – naming ‘em the “Near Leaguers” for the simple fact that they was as near in talent to major leaguers as you could get this side of the Mason-Dixon line. Funny thing was, when I first come across those boys, they didn’t look to be much more than a bunch of rag-tag, ne’er-do-wells what looked like they couldn’t afford proper uniforms. Turns out, that was exactly what ol’ Lollie wanted folks to think about his boys when they first laid eyes on them. You see, the Near Leaguers started off making their living barnstorming. What I mean by that is they got paid to play agin textile, semi-professional, or even minor league teams when those teams needed practice or couldn’t get a game with rivals in their own league. Most times, that “pay” would come in the form of a wager, with Lollie laying down a princely sum (a good deal of it his old man’s money, I suspect) on the Near Leaguers. Course, if Cap’ns and other owners knew right from the start their boys was gonna get beat, or worse yet, embarrassed, they’d have never agreed to the matches in the first place. So Lollie, always the showman and a bit of a huckster, never purchased any decent uniforms for his team,

then gave his boys firm orders to sandbag it in exhibition type warm-ups so as not to tip off any of the locals.

Lollie and his gang spent the better part of 1906 traveling the Southland *away* from Greenville, looking to challenge any unsuspecting bunch of ballplayers naïve enough to take them on. In fact, that's how our paths crossed. The Near Leaguers happened to be in Greer one Saturday when they found my Victor Mill's team in desperate need of an opponent. We was scheduled to play some boys from Cliffside Mills up in North Carolina, but a downpour two nights before had caused the Broad River to overflow its banks and all wagon roads and railroad lines in and out of the foothills was flooded over. Now I don't know that you could rightly say the Cap'n over at Victor Mills fell for Lollie's hustle so much as he didn't really have a choice. Folks had been planning for that game all week long and for it to be cancelled last minute like that was likely to put more than a few millhands in a "rebellious mood" to say the least. To calm the restless natives, the Cap'n for Victor Mills agreed to Lollie's terms practically without deliberation.

Needless to say, those boys whipped our tails but good. I reckon I must have made something of an impression on ol' Lollie just the same, cause before nine innings was even in the books, he come to offer me a spot on his team. Course, this would mean a return to pitcher to start, as I'd have to earn my way into the everyday lineup. But at five dollars per contest, it was a hard offer to pass up. As luck would have it, I didn't have to.

I agreed to join the Near Leaguers on two conditions. The first being that no matter what sort of game, scam or outright hustle ol' Lollie might be trying to run at the time, I'd always play to win. Lollie, not having much choice in the matter, agreed right

off to my first demand. My second demand was that I be allowed to continue to patrol left field for the Victor Mills team. Seeing as how as a pitcher I would only be used two, three times a week tops, I still needed the pay from my Saturday Special performances. Lollie agreed, but this time he had a condition of his own. If my moonlighting for Victor Mills got in the way of my pitching for his boys, all bets were off.

As luck would have it, I never did have to give up one job to keep the other because the two clubs had such diverse schedules. The Wildcats played mostly on Saturday mornings, whilst the Near Leaguers went at it throughout the week and towards evening on Saturdays – this latest offer wouldn't require my quitting the Victor team, leastwise not altogether. The superintendent at Victor Mills let me tailor my schedule around my day games during the week. And even when I was scheduled to play for both teams, more times than not, I was still able to lend my services to both teams. I'd play for left field for Victor Mills come Saturday morning. After that first game, I'd catch the Seaboard Train from Greer to the depot in West Greenville, hitch a ride on Cap'n Martin's streetcar, and be at Graham Field in time to take the mound for the Near Leaguers.

Being as good as we were, it weren't long before the Greenville Near Leaguer's reputation began to proceed itself. In fact, most towns and communities had caught on to Lollie's hustle by midways of that inaugural season. Pretty soon there was no way my teammates could continue to hide their light under a bushel and expect to get away with it. Luckily, what he lost in wager money, Lollie begun to gain in gate receipts. Yessir, the boys and me was really starting to pack 'em in with our brand of base ball. The up-tempo college game Lollie had us playing was new to most mill communities. Where folks had

been used to watching both teams scratch and scrape for every run they put on the board, they was now seeing us use our youth and speed to keep the pressure constantly on the opposing team's defense. The hit-and-run was always on, as were plays some teams had never heard tell of like double-steals, stealing home plate, and stretching a sure double into an unlikely triple. These and similar hard-charging offensive moves often forced the other fellas into thinking instead of reacting, a mistake made worse by older or less experienced ballplayers. More often than not, we'd capitalize on those mistakes, which usually meant more scoring and, naturally, more exciting play. The team's newfound popularity also cut down considerably on our travel time, as Lollie was now able to offer visiting teams a percentage of the proceeds to come to Greenville; the only drawback being, old Graham Field Municipal Stadium wasn't up to holding more than 1200 fans, so the trade-off wasn't always a profitable one.

Greenville got itself a new field the following year, and along with it came the prospect of a new team. Lollie was in on the deal, of course, along with a consortium of other local businessmen and civic leaders. (I know "consortium" is a mighty fancy word for a hick of my sorts to be spoutin', but if I took a liking to a word, I'd learn it just to throw folks, especially the boys in the press, off their game.) Their first move was to find a manager who had the experience and know-how to run a professional organization. They found their man in one Thomas C. Stouch. Even though he played less than one full season for the Louisville Colonels of the National League, "Tommie" had developed a keen eye for talent. Soon as he was hired he hit the ground running, scouring territories as far north as Philadelphia (where he was from) and as far south as Georgia in search of respectable, professional grade ballplayers. Course some quality ballplayers, as Lollie

was quick to point out, was right there under his nose in the form of us Near Leaguers. Right as ol' Lollie might have been in his thinking, Tommie Stouch wasn't about to stock a team based entirely on someone else's say so. So, just two short weeks before the start of the season, an exhibition game was arranged between us Near Leaguers and the new boys Tommie had picked up in his travels. Those players who shined through, old or new, Rebel or Yank, would be chosen to represent the city.

Not as many folks came out to the new digs as Lollie and the rest of those well-heeled men would have hoped, but for an exhibition between two hometown teams, it was more than a respectable draw. By this time, I had shown enough of what I could do that Lollie had inserted me as the starting left fielder. I also earned the fourth position in the lineup.

Give 'em that Black Betsy, Joe!” was the familiar chant that greeted me as I stepped to the plate in the top half of the second inning. Of course, another familiar sight greeted me from behind the backstop: Katie's baby blues smiling back at me from beneath her ruffled blue bonnet. (Enough years had passed since our first “date” at Harrison's that I was finally able to court her proper-like... Of course, if you come down to it – you might argue that she were the one courtin' me.) The first inning was a three-up, three-down event for both teams, as each hurler – Bill O'Bannon for them and ol' Hyder Barr for us – appeared to be in rare form. With everyone else batting so poorly to that point, all it took for me to leave my mark on the game was one well-timed swing from ol' Betsy.

“Owwww! ... Shiiite!” Tommie cursed, after I smashed a blue-darter off his shin that careened so far the left fielder had to fetch it. The crowd fell silent as that once proud National Leaguer hopped around on one leg like a man possessed.

“Time!” called the umpire.

Tommie appeared to be in such distress that his entire infield rushed over to help him, but before even his shortstop could get to him – Tommie angrily waved them off. “I’m alright. I’m alright,” he insisted, taking a gander in my direction. I stared back, not quite sure how I should react. “Hey, Bill,” Tommie said, calling his pitcher over to him. “You watch this rube,” I overheard him tell O’Bannon. “See if you can discover his weakness.”

“Sure thing, boss,” was his pitcher’s reply as now both of them was glaring in my direction. Taking their discussion as a challenge, I smiled real big and gave a sure wink in return.

Over the course of the next seven innings, I knocked that horsehide from foul pole to foul pole and through every gap in between. Hitting wise, it was probably the best game I’d played to that point in my career. When it was all said and done, the boys and me had soundly defeated those new fellas by some fifteen runs. And as far as ol’ Bill O’Bannon was concerned, not only didn’t he discover any of my weaknesses, but I heard him tell Tommie that he “didn’t fancy buckin’ heads against any more of my wallops.” Anyhow, Tommie caught up to me as I was counting the money my brothers had collected for the long balls I’d stroked that day, including a homer in the ninth.

“How much you got there?”

“Twenty-nine dollars and seventy-five cents,” I replied.

Tommie reached into his pocket and took out two bits. “That was a whale of a game you played, son,” he said, tossing the twenty-five cent piece into the hat – giving me an even thirty. “Takes one helluva’ ballplayer to whip my boys the way you did.”

“Thank you kindly, sir,” I said, thanking him for the addition to my purse as well as the compliment. “But I can’t rightly take all the credit. My teamma – ”

“Sure, kid, I understand,” Tommie interrupted. “Name’s Tommie Stouch,” he said, offering his hand.

The first time I shook hands with Tommie Stouch was like looking into one of them fun mirrors at the Scottish Games. At six foot two, and a buck eighty-five or so, Tommie and me was identical in size and stature, only difference being, he had nearly twenty years on me... and it showed. His hair appeared to be fighting a losing battle with his scalp and the widow’s peak that remained was peppered with gray. It was an odd sensation that I didn’t care to have go on any longer –

“Joe – Joseph Jackson, sir,” I said before I turned to Kate and introduced her. “And this here’s Miss Kathryn Wynn, sir.”

“*Katie’s* just fine,” she said, speaking up for herself.

“Pleasure to meet you, Katie,” Tommie returned, leaving my hand to take hers. “And I’d prefer you both call me *Tommie*” he said, as he lifted Katie’s hand to his pursed lips, gave it a peck, and then turned his attentions back on me. “‘*Sir*’ just tends to remind a fella how old he is, and believe you-me, no ballplayer on the difficult side of twenty-five wants to be reminded of that.”

“Yes, sir – I mean, no, sir, I mean – ”

“I’ve got a proposition for you,” Tommie said, interrupting me again. Course this time he had every right to; I don’t know what it was, but somethin about that fella made me as punchy as a longed-tailed cat in a room full of rockers. Before he continued, Tommie looked over at Katie as though he expected her to leave now that the men folk was about to talk business... but she wasn’t going nowhere. You see Katie wasn’t just my steady girl; she was my guardian angel. Seeing as how I couldn’t read or write a lick, Katie and me had agreed that she would be in on any negotiations that I might get into, mainly so’s I wouldn’t be taken advantage of.

“Okay, here’s the deal: I’m the manager of that team you just gave a licking to. Well, I will be. Ya see, this is going to be the “inaugural” season for a professional league team we’re calling the Greenville Spin – ” This time Tommie cut his own self short, then cut right to the chase. “Ah, hell, let’s get down to brass tacks here, son. I want you on my team. What’s it gonna take to reel you in?”

I already had an inkling I’d made the team, but the straight forward way he’d presented his offer kinda took me off guard. (I would come to learn over time that that was just Tommie’s way; in fact, it was the way of most Yankees: get to the point and don’t beat around any bushes on your way there. Southerners, on the other hand, take their time like they take their tea – extra sweet.) “Well,” I said, “I am getting along pretty nice. I get thirty-five a month from the mill, but I get four dollars a game on Saturdays – five when I play with the Near Leaguers – so that gives me at least fifty-five a month in all.” When I had finished, I looked down at Katie to make sure I’d figured correctly. Katie nodded, giving me the okay to continue. “I reckon I ought to be worth at least sixty-five a month to you, long as I can keep my home run money.”

“Joe, you keep hitting ’em – you can keep every penny you get. If you promise me you’ll play for me and me only and that you’ll stay off the corn whiskey, I’ll pay you a salary of *seventy-five* a month. Your first month being paid in advance, of course.”

Tommie’s generous offer struck Katie and me both speechless.

“So what’s the verdict, kid?”

“Mister, I’ll work my head off for seventy-five dollars a month!”

A New Day

“Cock-a-doodle-doo!”

Today’s a new day, I thought to myself as I wriggled into my new cotton trousers, pulled my new Spinners jersey with the fancy lettering down over my head, laced on the new shoes Pa had bought me (Pa was big on shoes since he believed you could always tell what a man thought of himself by the shoes he chose to put on his feet), and proceeded to bound off the front porch – sending that noisy rooster and his lady friends a flying in all directions. I had finally come to accept the fact that I was a legitimate, professional ballplayer. *Yes, sir, today was a new day. New day, new team, new uniform, and even a new pair of spikes to start things off on the right foot.*

“Easy, boy! You’re spookin’ my best layin’ hens!” Pa yelled after me.

I couldn’t help it; I had finally been set free from the mill life for good. To be honest, I hadn’t done any hard labor in the mill in years, but Lardbottom’s claim that I was a linthead and that was all I was ever gonna be had stuck with me since that day in Harrison’s. But now, through the grace of God and some hard work on my part, I figured I had finally proven old Lardbottom wrong. Joseph Jefferson Wofford Jackson was a professional ballplayer and official representative of the city of Greenville, South Carolina, thank you very much. Not only that, at the rate they was paying me, it wouldn’t be no time at all before I could set Pa up in that sawmill business of his. No more textile mills for me, Pa, or – God and time willing – the rest of the Jackson clan. Ma would soon be free to stay at home and care for her young’uns like she always wanted; whilst Davey, Jerry and the rest of the bunch could go to school full time and receive a proper education. Best of all, there was one other bit of unfinished business I would finally be able to tend to.

“Joseph!” It was Ma and she was trailing after me like she did before every practice, with a big ol’ paper poke-sack in her hand. She reached me just as I was about to throw my leg over my bicycle seat and head out. “I fixed you some sausage biscuits. There’s a jar of sorghum in there, too. And fresh cow’s milk,” she said, placing it in the basket Pa had fashioned for me on the front of my bicycle. “Careful not to leave it in the sun. You don’t want it to spoil.”

“Thanks, Ma,” I said, giving her a peck on the cheek.

“I’ll be prayin’ for you, Joseph.”

“Better you pray for the other team, Ma,” I boasted. “Bye, Pa!” I shouted as I mounted my bicycle and headed out.

“Sure is a prideful cuss,” I could hear my father say as I started down the red-clay road. I didn’t have to hear my ma’s reply to know what she was thinking.

The road to Perry Avenue Field passed by the Perry Avenue Schoolhouse in West Greenville where my best girl was still a student in the tenth grade. I whipped my bicycle to a stop and waited for her underneath a giant oak tree. I did my best to keep me and my bicycle behind the trunk of that big old tree so’s not to be spotted by any busybodies inside the brick schoolhouse that sat on yon end of an acre of green grass. Whilst I waited, I heard a group of young’uns singing at the top of their lungs –

“A-b-c-d-e-f-g, h-i-j-k-l-m-n-o-p, q-r-s, t-u-v, w-x, y and z... Now I know my a,b,c’s, tell me what you think of me.”

That song knocked me off my high-horse quicker than if I’d been shot out of the saddle. *I wonder what folks think of me – someone who doesn’t know a lick of his a-b-c’s? ...*They thought I was ignorant, that’s what they thought. They figured that just

because I didn't have no formal book learnin', I must have been born stupid... Thank Heavens for base ball. Base ball was my saving grace; without base ball, I might've gone on believing I was as good for nothing as folks like Lardbottom Terry always told me I was. But with base ball, I was good for *something* and not a soul could argue otherwise. No, sir, long as I was producing runs for their ball club, the good folks of Greenville County didn't seem to mind a bit that I couldn't read or write. And besides, my new salary would go a long way in feeding, clothing, and educating the rest of the Jackson clan, so Ma shouldn't have much to complain about, either. Heck fire, I'd soon be earning over one hundred dollars a month, and in those days, there weren't many men who could argue agin that kind of salary. *Joe Jackson, you should hold your head proud,* I reminded myself. *Concentrate on the good things in this life instead of the bad.* Long about then, one of the best things to ever come across my path snuck up behind me.

“Boo!”

“Did I startle you?” Katie asked.

“No,” I replied.

“What were you thinking about?”

“Oh, nothing,” I lied.

“Come on, you can tell me.”

“No. Never mind. Besides, I got something much more important,” I said as I reached in my pocket and took out the silver engagement ring I had just spent my signing bonus on. I quickly hid the thing behind my back before she could catch a glimpse of what it was. “Close your eyes,” I ordered.

“What – Why?” Katie urged, trying to sneak a look at what was in my hand.

“Sooner you close those pretty peepers of yours, the sooner you’re likely to find out,” I said, making sure to keep my body between Katie and that ring.

“Alright, alright, they’re closed,” she said, fighting her urge to keep them open.

“Kathryn Wynn,” I said, taking the ring and sliding it on the ring finger of her left hand, “will you – ”

“Yes!” she answered, before I could officially pop the question. “Yes! Yes! Yes!” she said, dancing around me like an Injun around a fire.

Home Field Advantage

Perry Avenue Field was the new home of the Spinners, Greenville’s entry in the six-member, Class D Carolina League (with Anderson and Spartanburg, South Carolina

and Charlotte, Greensboro, and Winston-Salem, North Carolina fielding the others.) The early morning practice was the final warm-up for the upcoming doubleheader with the Anderson Electricians. Folks from all reaches of Greenville County began streaming in as early as ten o'clock (the first game wasn't scheduled to start until noon.) There were schoolchildren playing hooky and businessmen doing the same. Colored folk came, too, including Jake, though I would have rather he'd been standing beside me with a glove on his hand, than sitting in the section marked "colored" (a body didn't have to read to recognize those signs) with a bag of peanuts in his lap. (If you wanna know my opinion of Blacks being kept out of base ball, I believed then as I do now: a man ought to be allowed to chase whatever dreams his heart desires, no matter what color his skin might happen to be. Trouble was, not all white folk saw things the way I did, especially in them days. Actually, I take that back. There were probably a lot of white folks who shared the same opinion as me, they just didn't want to risk a beatin' – or worse – expressin' it.)

Like I said, it was quite a crowd and, though I had no idee at the time, it would prove to be quite a day. A day that would have a more profound (that's a word I learnt from Mr. Connie Mack who I'll be introducing you to shortly) influence on the course of my life than any I'd lived before. Heck, it was dang-near more important the any I've seen since. Looking back, I reckon I should have known there was something special in the air that day; after all, I had just asked Kate to be my bride; my favorite umpire, Wild Bill O'Laughlin, was calling the games; and, last but not least, my boyhood idol had come to town.

"Champ! Over here, Champ!" was the common, giddy cry from the twenty or more local debutantes that had turned out to see the major league star. Actually, Champ's

hitting had tailed off considerably since his move to the big leagues, but that weren't necessarily anything to worry about, as any sort of change in a batter's atmosphere can send his average into convulsions. Local legend that he was, Champ had been named honorary co-captain (with yours truly having been elected earlier in the season) for the first game of a scheduled doubleheader. After swimmin' through a sea of female admirers vying for his attentions, Champ finally made it over to the bullpen area where I was catching brother Davey in a bit of pitching practice. At sixteen, Davey had near as powerful an arm as Hyder Barr, our best hurler. Though he weren't officially on the team, the kid had shown enough for Tommie to allow him to join us in practice on occasion.

"What do you say, fellas?" Champ asked. Right off I noticed there was something different about my old friend; something I couldn't quite put my finger next to. He still had the same swagger to his walk, the same fire in his voice, but something else was surely *missing*.

"Champ," we acknowledged before we continued our practice.

"Big game today, huh, Joe?"

"I reckon," I said, not much considering that it might be any different than the hundred or more games I'd played since the day I took over for Mutt Rollins and his busted knuckles.

"Did I ever tell you boys about the pennant I *almost* won with the New York club?" Champ asked, moving into position to join our game of catch.

"Don't reckon you could have, seeing as how you haven't said more than two words to either one of us in more than two years," I answered back, surprising even myself with my smart aleck reply.

“Right, right. Sorry about that. I’m afraid traveling from city-to-city on one iron horse or another doesn’t allow a fellow much time for keeping up with old friends,” Champ offered, as he fit that scant piece of leather he called a glove over his left hand. “Yes, sir, a life riding the rails sure can get next to a man,” he continued, motioning for my brother to toss the ball his way. “Don’t get me wrong; I wouldn’t trade it for the world. No, sir, all-in-all, I’d have to say there’s nothing like the life of a major league ballplayer, that’s for sure,” he said, making the catch. “What other *legal* profession lets you feast on meals of porterhouse steak and port wine; sleep in beds of fine linen and red satin sheets; and cavort with lovely ladies dressed to the nines,” he said, stopping to give a wave to the debutantes still gazing in his direction. “... Which brings me to the point I’m trying to get across to you boys: You’ve got to make the most of life’s opportunities,” he said, firing the ball fast and deliberate in my direction. “I had an opportunity few people on God’s green earth are ever given, and I let it slip away.”

“How so?” my brother asked, showing my old mentor more interest than I cared to give him.

“Well, it had all come down to the final game of the 1904 series between us Highlanders and the Pilgrims from Boston. Whoever took this game would be taking home the pennant. ‘Happy Jack’ Chesbro was on the mound for us, and boy-howdy was he feeling it. Let me tell you, when ol’ Chez had his stuff – particularly that juicy spitter of his – there wasn’t a soul in the game could touch him. So there we were, one out from the American League pennant, when Jack’s famous control up and deserted him – beaming one fellow, then sending the next man down to first on four straight pitches. Now you might think our skipper, Clark Griffith, would’ve yanked him right then, but the Old

Fox wasn't about to pull a forty-one game winner at the first sign of adversity. Besides, the next fellow up was those Bean Town boys' number nine hitter. He was a timid fellow who'd made it to the majors on the strength of his glove, not his bat. Honestly, this kid didn't stand a chance in Holy-Hades and everybody in the house knew it."

I lost interest in our game of catch (or maybe it was Champ's story), and headed toward our dugout.

"So what happened?" Davey asked as the two of them blindly followed after me.

"The kid gets lucky, slices one foul. But it carries down the first base line and I draw a bead on it. All of a sudden, this wind kicks up out of nowhere – sends the danged thing sailing toward their dugout with me giving chase like it was the last streetcar out of Hoboken. Now I've got a decision to make: Do I run it down and risk taking a tumble? Or do I pull up and put the game back in Chez's hands?"

"You pulled up?" Davey asked.

"I pulled up. And don't you know, Happy Jack uncorks another wild one, but this one gets past our catcher, two runs score, and that's all she wrote. Game-set-and-match." Champ turned away from Davey, away from me, and scooped out a cup of water from the water cooler – taking a long, slow, deliberate drink before bringing home his point...

"There ain't a moment goes by I don't regret my decision that day."

"But you could've broke your neck," I pointed out.

"Maybe, but not likely. More likely, I'd be standing here with a fancy gold ring on my finger and a smile on my face," he said, stepping down – a bit gingerly – into the dugout with the rest of us.

That's what was missing, I thought to myself, his smile.

“My point is: when Lady Luck knocks, you’d better invite her in and treat her like a queen, because there’s no guarantee you’re ever going to see her again,” Champ said, sounding as if he weren’t expecting a return visit from the mistress in question anytime soon. (Which didn’t make sense to me, since he was only thirty-two years old at the time.) “You see that fancy fellow sitting on yon side of third base,” he continued, “about ten rows up?”

I looked to where Champ was gesturing and came across one of the most duded-up fellows I’d ever laid eyes on. His hair was cut close, stood on end in a crew-cut fashion and was peppered with gray. Most interesting of all was the long, handlebar mustache that curled out a good inch from the corners of his mouth – making it look like he was a grinnin’ even when he wasn’t. The old boy had to a been from up north, cause even though it was still early and the sun hadn’t quite crept over the tree line in left-center field, he was already fanning himself with his fancy fedora.

“Name’s ‘Socks’ Seybold. He’s one of Connie Mack’s boys,” Champ said, as I watched that odd man with the odd name take on a stogie the size of a summer sausage. “Apparently, your manager still has some pull up north.”

“Who’s ‘Connie Mack’?” I asked, showing my ignorance.

“*Who’s Connie Mack?*” Davey squealed. “Lord have mercy, big brother, *Cornelius Alexander McGillicuddy* ain’t nothing but one of the most powerful owner – managers in all of base ball. He runs the show for the Philadelphia Athletics. His boys took the pennant in naught-two.”

“That right?” I asked, though I had no real reason to doubt my brother. My recent success in base ball had gotten him out of the mill and into the classroom long enough to

learn to read and write. He'd been following the exploits of major league ball players every day since.

"Every word of it," Champ assured me. "Bottom line: you impress that banty rooster up yonder, and you can punch your ticket to 'The Show'. And believe me when I say, until you bring your game to The Show and go against the best one-hundred-and-fifty-two times a year, you ain't never gonna know how good you really are."

That was the thing about Champ; he was about as subtle as a Holiness preacher on Easter Sunday. Course, I reckon it wouldn't pay for a mentor to mince his words, lest he end up providing more confusion than help. Sides, he did have a point: if I was going to be the best player I was obliged to be, it only stood to reason that I'd have to take my game to the next level. (Finding out how you stack up agin others is always on the mind of an athlete.) Yes, sir, if I was going to be the best, I'd have to beat the best.

"Play ball!" Wild Bill bellowed.

Us being the home team, the Electricians got to bat first, with yours truly taking the mound. Champ was installed as our shortstop, taking over for Tommie who watched from the manager's position on the bench. (Tommie didn't mind none, as he himself admitted that, at thirty-eight, he was getting a might long-in-the-tooth to be playing such an active position as shortstop.) Now I don't know if it was the added pressure of that stranger's eyes on me, or just the simple fact that I was having an off day, but whatever the reason, I couldn't muster anything near my best stuff.

"Ball four!" Wild Bill yelled, sending their leadoff man to first base.

Four more pitches – four more balls. I didn't even look up. I couldn't bear to. I knew whoever's eyes I might meet would be asking the same question I was asking

myself: *What's wrong with you?* To tell you the truth, I didn't have any idea. Especially since my guardian angel was sitting in her usual seat, five rows up behind home plate.

The one thing I did know, however, was that the next batter was a tall, gangly fellow with a strike zone the size of Lardbottom's posterior. On my worst day, I couldn't miss such an ample target. Without peering any higher than the target my catcher's mitt offered, I sent my best fastball straight down the pike... And he sent it right back, about 390 foot farther than the sixty feet it had traveled to get there. The game was barely ten minutes old, and already I was looking up from the bottom of a three-run deficit. I'd made an impression on that big league scout all right, just not the kind I'd hoped to.

"*Time!*" called Tommie, jogging over to the mound.

"What's wrong, kid?" he asked.

"I don't know," I said.

"In that case, you'd better hand over the pill."

"What? Why?"

"Son, if you're feeling the heat, the worst place to be is in the kitchen. You can't keep any secrets out here, specially from a fellow like that." We both looked over at Mr. Socks Seybold who leaned in, took a long draw on his cigar, and then exhaled a ring of smoke ring that grew as it floated off into the still, muggy air. "Why don't you give me the pill – I'd hate to see your career end before it even gets started," Tommie insisted.

I started to do as Tommie had asked when the strangest thing happened. Instead of being put off by Champ's words of doom and gloom, I actually began to draw courage from them, as they set me to thinking once more about my latest "predicament." The more I considered it, the more I kept hearing the same two words ringing in my head: *So*

what? “*So what*” if I lay an egg out here and never got called up to “The Show”? *So what*. The way I figured it, I’d still be able to make a living – a good living – playing the game I loved in the town I loved.

“No, sir,” I said. “I’ll finish what I started if that’s okay.”

“It’s your funeral, kid,” Tommie replied, returning to the dugout.

From that point on, I forgot all about Champ’s words and that fancy fella behind third base and proceeded to do exactly what I promised I would: I finished the game. In fact, I not only finished the game, I finished it in grand fashion – retiring all twenty-one of the batters I faced (in order to fit both games in on a single day, doubleheaders generally run no more than seven innings apiece.) Nary another batter reached first base the rest of the way.

That day I was presented with several choices I had never faced before, the least of which seemed to be whether I should wear my new spikes out on the mound, or wait until the next game when I’d be playing the more relaxed position of left field. (Hyder Barr was scheduled to take the mound for the second outing.) I chose wrong. The sweltering heat, sweat, and constant digging motion of my left foot inside that stiff new shoe combined to raise some of the worst blood blisters I’d ever suffered.

“Hey, Jackson, the Navy just called – they want their boats back,” Hyder commented in his usual way, getting a rise from the rest of the boys on the bench. Truth-be-told, in those gray stockings and with them blisters protrudin’ as they were, my feet did sort of resemble a couple of Navy gunboats.

“Mr. Stouch?”

“Yeah, kid?” Tommie replied.

“You reckon I could sit this next one out?” I asked.

“You’re pulling my leg, right, kid?” he shot back, spitting a long, black stream of ’bacca juice into the dirt at my feet.

“Yes, sir,” I said, wondering how in the world I was ever going to perform with my dogs barking at me the way they were.

“Good. Now get out there and do your thing,” Tommie ordered.

“Yes, sir,” I said, rising gingerly to my feet.

“And stop calling me ‘sir’!” he yelled.

It didn’t take but one blindingly painful step for me to know there was no way I could continue, leastwise not with those blasted shoes on my feet. So, before the second game had even commenced, I ditched my spikes and decided to go shoeless. Early on, my stocking feet didn’t attract much more attention than the harassing I took from Hyder and the rest of the guys. But, as the game carried on and it became apparent that no one was going to run away with this one, the opposing crowd began to get restless. We was in first place at the time, so every other team’s fanatics had it in for us but good. As the bad blood boiled over, the catcalls became louder and more personal.

“What’s the matter, linthead, can’t you afford shoes?” was the first of the bunch aimed at my feet; while *“Hey, hillbilly! Don’t you know we wear shoes in these parts?”* followed soon afterward. But the worst of the bunch, the one that would hound me even after my playing days was over, came in the final inning. It was the bottom of the seventh and I had just smashed a blue-darter off the wall in left-center. Normally I would have taken my sure triple, but seeing as how that blast was the first hard shot to be hit off of either pitcher since the start, I figured I’d best try to stretch it out – end the game before

the sun set and we'd have to settle for a draw (an outcome no one fancied, especially for a game so hard fought.) As I rounded third, I heard the catcall to end all catcalls –

“Oh, you shoeless son of a bitch!”

It was bad enough the big galoot who yelled it had the benefit of a megaphone what blared his voice loud enough for everyone in the stadium to hear, to make matters a thousand times worse – a reporter by the name of “Scoop” Latimer was in the stands covering the game for the *Greenville News*. I don't need to tell you, he took that musical moniker and ran with it. We won the game that day, but I've been trying to live down that awful nickname every day since.

Big League Promise

Now, to blame all my dispeacefulness and unrest on a silly nickname would be more than a bit farfetched. Though it is true I never cared much for the name, “shoeless”, my real distress didn't begin until after the game when a teammate, Billy Laval, poked his head inside the locker room and called out –

“Hey Jackson!”

“Yeah?” I said, stuffing my dirty uniform into my duffel bag.

“Skipper wants to see you and Hyder in his office right away,” Billy finished, his cleats clapping hollow-like against the cobblestones as he trotted back down the hallway.

Right off, I had my misgivings about the meeting I was about to have with Tommie and that dandy from up north, Socks Seybold. I simply didn’t want to go. The humidity had taken most of the crease out of my cotton dress shirt and the pleat in my pants weren’t nowhere to be seen. *Not a very presentable way for an employee to address his boss, let alone some big shot from the major leagues*, I thought to myself. Sides which, after home games, it was customary for me to meet Katie down to Harrison’s for a dope-and-lime where I’d regale the local “fanning bee” – a group of fanatics who lived and breathed Spinner’s base ball – with stories from the bullpen (or the dugout, as the case might have been.) But wrinkled clothes and a missed bull-session weren’t any more causes for concern than the uninspired moniker I’d recently been tagged with. No, sir, my true concern was still there, waiting for me just at the other end of that cobbled hallway.

“What is it?” I asked, staring down at the piece of paper that banty rooster had just shoved at me across Tommie’s desk.

“What does it look like – it’s a contract,” Socks said, as if it was the dumbest question he’d ever heard. “My boss just shelled out fifteen hundred clams – nine for you and six more for your pal, Heidi.”

“Hyder,” I corrected him.

“Whatever,” he returned, in his Yankee sort of way.

“So if I sign this, I’ll be in the major leagues?”

“That’s right, son,” Tommie chimed in. “You put your John Hancock to that piece of paper and you’ll be an Athletic. Then you, Hyder and Mr. Seybold here will catch the next rattler up to Philly.”

“Hallelujah! I’ll go stir crazy if I have to spend another night in this one horse town,” the banty rooster crowed.

Course, I couldn’t read a word of that contract and with Katie waiting for me outside the clubhouse, my hesitation in signing was only natural; but I’d be lying if I said there weren’t more to it than that. A lot more. Before Champ had give his speech about Lady Luck, I don’t know that I’d given more than a minute’s thought to the major leagues. Truth be told, becoming a major league star wasn’t my dream as much as it was everyone else’s. As you might recall, Katie had big plans for me even before we met, knowing in her heart that someday soon I’d be “bigger even” than that fellow with the strange name, Napoleon Lajoie. And Davey, well, I reckon he’d been planning on it for some time, too. Figuring that if I found success as a major league ball player, it would be that much easier for him to follow in his big brother’s footsteps.

For my money, I was happy right where I was. Just like Champ before me, I had become the marquee idol of the entire upstate – girls swooned (my heart and my hands may have belonged to Katie, but my eyes had a mind of their own) whilst grown men longed to spend a day in my shoes. Aside from the occasional hurtful catcall, I was enjoying every minute I spent as a big ol’ bass in a pond full of bream, thank you very much. And if’n I’d had my druthers, I’d have spent the rest of my natural born days right there in Greenville proper... snug as a bug in a rug.

“There a problem, kid?” the banty rooster squawked, his feathers getting a bit ruffled.

“Where’d you say I’d be playing?” I asked Tommie, stalling a might more.

“Philly. Philadelphia, Pennsylvania,” Tommie replied.

“City of Brotherly Love,” Seybold crowed proudly. Course, what that struttin’ bird had to say didn’t carry much weight with me, so I looked over at Tommie for an opinion I could trust.

“All things considered, Philadelphia’s a fine town, Joe. I’m sure you’ll like it there just fine.”

Not exactly what you’d call a ringing endorsement.

“No offense, sirs, but I hardly know as folks’ll cotton to me up north,” I said.

“Christ, kid, that war’s been over for forty years. Let me tell you something, the folks where I’m from are starving for anything close to a hero. If you make half the plays I saw you make out there today on a daily basis, they won’t give a rat’s ass if you’re General Lee, hisself,” Mr. Socks Seybold pointed out in his loud sort of way.

All my stalling hadn’t gotten me any closer to a decision, but it had brought me to a question you’d have thought I’d have asked from the get.

“How much will I be earning?”

“You’ll be earning what you earned here to start, plus expenses,” Tommie spoke up, “but you keep belting that ball from pillar-to-post at a three-fifty clip and I can pretty much guarantee you that come next season, you’ll get a fair shake. If I know Connie Mack, his offer’ll be no less than the fair market value.”

“He’s right kid,” Mr. Socks Seybold chimed in. “One thing about Mr. Mack, he looks after his ball players.”

“‘Fair market value’?” I asked, not having heard those particular words strung together like that before.

“Think of it this way, kid,” the loud fellow explained, “you’re batting about three-fifty this season with the club here in Greensboro, right?”

“I reckon,” I said, figuring now weren’t the time to give that peacock a geography lesson.

“Well there you go. Tyrus Cobb led the American League last year with a three-fifty average, and I happen to know his contract was worth twenty-four hundred if it was worth a plug nickel. So, a ‘fair market’ contract for a ball player just coming into the league and batting at a three-fifty clip would be somewhere around twenty-four hundred. But you don’t want to quote me on that. You do, and I’ll deny every word of it.”

“Twenty-four hundred dollars?” I said, not believing what I’d just heard.

“Long as you keep up your end of the bargain,” Mr. Seybold said again.

I thought I was confused before. Now I had more things to consider. Twenty-four hundred more things, to be exact. *Twenty-four hundred a season*, I reckoned, *would go a long way toward setting up the Jackson clan for good. For starters, I could finally afford to give Katie the life she deserved. And Ma, Ma could have whatever house her heart desired – with a room for each of the young’uns. Course, then I’d have to set Pa up in one business or another... probably a butcher shop. Lately, all his talk has been about butcher shops and how they are a safe bet in good times and bad. I have to admit, his argument does seem to hold water. Folks do always need meat, no matter how light their*

wallets; it's the cuts that change with the times. Most importantly of all, just a few years of collecting such a high salary from base ball would pretty much guarantee that NO ONE in the Jackson clan would ever have to set foot in another cotton mill again.

“Where do I sign?” I said, not considering it for another second.

“Write there on the dotted line,” Socks said with a sigh.

I dipped the quill in the inkwell and, just as I was about to mark my “X” (which was all that was officially needed, since there was more than a few folks in them days what couldn't read or write) on the dotted line, a very important thought occurred to me –

“Cept, I have some business to tend to first,” I said, putting down the quill.

“Oh, no. *Hell*, no. I'm not staying in this backwater bayou one minute longer.

You go with me tonight, or you don't go at all,” Socks threatened.

Twenty-four hundred dollar salary or not, I weren't about to budge – and I weren't about to leave Greenville County a single man, either.

“Have it your way, kid,” Socks said, taking a big puff on his cigar before he turned his back on the two of us and headed towards the office door.

Well, I thought to myself, *I reckon that's it. All that frettin' for nothin.* But, just as I had begun to convince myself that a life without a twenty-four hundred dollar salary could be a life worth living, Tommie stepped up and saved my hide.

“Socks, you bring Hyder up with you tonight. Tell Mr. Mack I'll have Joe up there day after tomorrow – in plenty of time for the series against Detroit. If that's okay by Joe,” Tommie said, looking my way.

I gave him my answer by marking my “X” on that dotted line.

Honeymoon in Philly



Joe Jackson, the popular center fielder of the local team made the greatest home run of his career Sunday. The home run was made on Cupid's diamond and the victory was a fair young lady. On Sunday afternoon at 4:30 o'clock Joe was married to Miss Kate Wynn, the Reverend W.B. Justis Officiating. The happy couple have the best wishes of all fandom.

- The Greenville News, July 20th, 1908

Course the "business" I had to tend to was me and Kate's (I quit referrin' to Kate as "Katie" the day we tied the knot, but don't ask me why cause I couldn't tell you) wedding. Being as how it come off at the very last minute, it was a small affair held at Brandon Baptist Church across from the mill (not a single one of my kinfolk outside my immediate family was invited – a slight I never heard the end of till my dyin' day.) Still, for one single, glorious afternoon, I forgot all my ridiculous worries – celebratin' the

wondrous occasion like there was no tomorrow. Looking back, it was by far the single, happiest day of my life. Unfortunately, the honeymoon didn't last...

The very next day I found myself standing all by my lonesome on a platform at the Greenville Depot. Kate, Davey and the rest all wanted to see me off, but I convinced them that it would be best for everyone if I said my goodbyes the night before. If they were to all come down to watch me off, I'd probably never get on the train. This way there'd be nothing tuggin' at me sides my conscience and the hairpins Kate had stuffed into one of the pouches on my leather war bag (a wedding gift from Champ). It was still nearly pitch dark when I arrived and the only other soul stirring was a rooster I spied perched atop a nearby fence post (and even he didn't appear to be fully awake.) With all that quiet all around, there weren't much chance I was going to be able to ignore the thoughts that was swimmin' around my head. But since I was still riding my high from the night before, drunk on love and more than my share of hard cider, I told myself I could do just that: ignore it and it would all go away.

Ma had packed a poke lunch big enough to last me through December, so I grabbed a chicken leg and a hunk of cornbread and set myself down at the edge of the platform, propping my back agin that stiff old war bag. After years of Pa and me traveling this way to work, I knowed it was the best seat in the house to watch the sunrise – especially this time of the year. The way those shiny steel tracks trailed out to the horizon, it gave a fellow the idee he could travel them all the way to the end of the earth and, if he were a mind to, cross over into the heart of that big red-orange ball. At such a peaceful moment, and with the light of day continuin' to spill over my melancholy mood, it was just a matter of time before I sobered up. As I sat there with my size twelve

Brogans dangling over the edge of the platform, the strong smell of tar from the pitch soaked railroad ties all around began to overpower my appetite 'til I was left with nothing better to do but study on my situation. Before I knew it, the question – actually, it was more like a sense – that had weighed me down so the past couple of days returned with a vengeance: *Am I doing the right thing?* It was ridiculous, I know. After all, what fella in his right mind wouldn't jump at the chance to play major league ball for twenty-four hundred dollars a season? Sure, I'd miss being the belle of the ball here in Greenville, but there was more to it than that. Something just wasn't setting right, but I couldn't put my finger next to it to save me. Something deep down in the pit of my stomach was gnawing at me like a hungry coon.

“Cock-a-doodle-doo!”

That was it. Champ, the former cock-of-the-walk in Greenville, was strutting around without the one thing he'd probably carried with him since the day he was big enough to heft a bat... his smile. Come to think of it, Tommie Stouch, the only other fella I knowed ever played an inning of major league ball, never seemed to have much to smile about, neither. What made it worse, both of them was always frettin' over bygone days instead of appreciatin' the day the Good Lord had just set before them. Now while I couldn't rightly say why ol' Tommie was such a surly fellow, I knowed for a fact there was only one thief what could have been responsible for stealing away Champ's famous grin. You see, James Champlin Osteen was like a brother to me. I knew him good. Real good. Good enough to know that only one thing of any importance had changed in his life since the day he left Brandon: Champ had made the move up to major league base ball and somewhere along the way he'd lost his love for the game.

The cause of my disquiet had finally come clear to me: both my mentors, the two men who had already walked the path I was about to head down, were two of the most unhappy fellas I knowed. This revelation did not sit well with me *a-tall*. If being miserable was the price I would have to pay to make a decent living in baseball, I weren't so sure I wanted any part of it. Lord help me, what should have been the happiest moment of my life this side of my marrying Kate, was fast becoming one of the worst moments I would experience in all my days. The longer I stood on that platform considering what it was about major league ball that could tax a fellow's nerve so, the more I began to dread the conductor's call...

"Morning, Joe," Tommie said, appearing behind me. "You ready?"

"I reckon," I said, clutching that old war bag tight to my chest.

"All aboard!"

THE END of Book One