

## Trivia

By Steve Myers

I still like baseball. I watch almost all the Cincinnati Reds games on TV. There's always a trivia question like: who were the two players to get into the Hall of Fame without the five year wait? Answer: Lou Gehrig and Roberto Clementine. Or: Wrigley Field was built for what Chicago team? Answer: the Federal League Chicago Whales and the field was called Weeghman Park. One I thought they should ask is: who was the greatest batter with Hispanic heritage? Answer: Ted Williams.

I'm old enough to have seen Williams play when the Red Sox came to Cleveland. Boudreau invented the shift just for him and he could still hit line drives right through it. I had a ball fouled off by Williams. The ball was knocked lop-sided and useless to play with. But who would even think of using that ball? I got the ball from my mother's brother, my uncle George. He lived in Boston after the war and went to Red Sox and Braves games. When he came to Ohio to live with us he gave me the ball.

He was working as a meat cutter in Boston when my dad called and said they were hiring at his shop where they made car bumpers.

George said, "I'm packing and I'll be there tomorrow."

He got on as a grinder on the polishing line. In those days bumpers, meant to protect a car, were big and heavy. His job was to grab a bumper hanging on a hook and remove burs and rough spots with a hand held grinder. It was hot hard work. When he came home his cap and work clothes were damp and blotched from sweat and covered with fine metal dust. After our house burned down and we moved into town one of my jobs was to bring his clean clothes downstairs for him and get three bottles of beer from the case in the cellar and put them in the refrigerator. When he came home he'd shower in the basement and come upstairs clean and smiling and get a beer. It was always a Budweiser.

When the Indians were at home he'd take me to the ball game -- sometimes to a night game during the week but almost always on Sunday. Right after he'd be back from eleven o'clock Mass he'd say, "C'mon, Steve, let's go see a game." Then we'd get into his Buick and drive up Route 14 to Cleveland. He'd park downtown -- so we'd avoid the after game traffic jam -- and walk down to Municipal Stadium on the lakefront. He'd walk fast -- long strides, opening and closing his fists -- and times I had to run to keep up with him. He'd buy a program and I'd keep score.

In the fall we went to the Browns game. The cold wind would come off of Lake Erie and blow snow

across the field and shroud the players in white and I'd warm my hands holding a paper cup full of hot chocolate. Once we went to see Notre Dame play Navy there and another time we drove to Pittsburgh to see them play Pitt. For some reason he liked Notre Dame. He said that during the war the scores most guys wanted to know were Notre Dame's and Slippery Rock State Teachers'.

My dad said that George had been a great pitcher before the war. He threw underhand, what they now call submarine. He had a fast ball that seemed to shoot up at you, a sharp curve, and a drop. When I started playing ball and he'd pitch to me I found out how good he was. Dad said, "George ruined his arm throwing taped ball. Nobody could afford new ones so we taped 'em up."

He was a medic in World War II and worked in hospitals in the U.S. and France and Holland. I still have a postcard he sent from Paris. On the front is a photograph of Notre Dame. He was drafted before Pearl Harbor; he was home on furlough when it happened. He'd been a thin young man about five seven or so and came out of the war nearly six feet and two hundred pounds. He said they had all the milk you could drink and all the bacon and eggs you could eat. He also had a small white scar on his chest where a piece of grenade hit him. He let me see the chunk of metal and said, "Heavy isn't it?" It had happened in training. After the war he went to Boston because he didn't want to work in the mines like his father and brother had.

When we lived in the country my dad and George would try to punt a football over the tall maple to the side of the driveway. He wore wire-rimmed army glasses. He drove a Buick. He would stand in the archway between the parlor and living room and watch TV while he drank a Bud and ate a slice of cheese. He was the one to bring champagne into the house and he used to go to New York to see Broadway shows. He liked to dance and, for the short time we had an upright, he played the piano.

In school he skipped from sixth to ninth grade. Once I watched him read a five hundred page novel in a half hour. He stood there running his finger down the pages, flipping through the book page by page. He would shuffle a deck of cards and then deal out hand after hand calling out each card before he turned it over. He said he'd memorized them as he shuffled. He told me that when he was in school that he reviewed in bed everything he'd read that day before falling asleep. I tried it and it made tests easy, all the way through college.

He walked the five miles to high school without missing a day through the Western Pennsylvania winters. He had a nickel a week allowance. He used it to play pool on his lunch break. He got good enough to play for money and make that five cents last the week. Once when we played pool at the Eagles – I was

in my late teens and he was married – he said, “I don’t know. I suppose she loves me.” He was thirty-six when he married a woman with a Slovak mother like his mother.

He explained the H bomb to me. He gave me a book on astronomy. When I joined the Air Force he said I wouldn’t like it because they would tell me when to shave and eat and go to bed. He was right. When I came home on leave the first time he told me to put on my uniform and we went to the VFW and I got free beer. When I came home again he’d had his first heart attack. His trousers hung loose, his shirt was too large, and his skin was gray. I hadn’t shaved and he asked if I was going to play for the House of David.

Then, at forty-two, he had his second attack on the way to work. He went to the doctor who said it was indigestion. He drove home, went into the house, and collapsed. He died that day in the hospital.

And that’s all?

It’s not nearly enough.

It’s such small stuff with no sense of the man.

There’s not his voice or smile or his loud sharp whistle with two fingers between his teeth or the way he danced so easily as if weightless. Nothing about what he thought about the war, about his life, about what he really wanted. I guess there are documents: a few photographs, old report cards, Army records, medical records, real estate transactions, a will, old clothes given to St. Vincent Paul...

And all that he never talked about – not just the war and what it was like in the wards. He never mentioned how he felt that winter Sunday morning when he was sixteen and as he came out of church and people were talking about the dead man on the tracks and he ran down the hill to see the body of his father lying there in the snow.

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