

He Took Me Out to the Ball Game

By Paul Edward Johnson

Between ages five and seven, while living in Royal Oak Michigan, I enjoyed sitting on the curb near our front yard, watching the big kids play baseball in the street.

I didn't know much about the game. But I knew it was important. It brought the people on our block together on Sunday afternoons.

One Sunday afternoon someone turned on a radio in a convertible parked near third base, to a Detroit Tigers game, while neighborhood ball players took turns swinging at a softball that didn't seem soft whenever I tried to catch it.

At one point during the radio broadcast of a Tigers game, the announcer started shouting louder than the big kids. They all stopped playing and moved closer to the convertible.

One of the kids yelled, "Kell hit that one clean over the left field wall!"

I knew about first base and second base and third and home plate, but that was the first time I had ever heard about the left field wall. Upon asking around about it, my five-and-six-and-seven-year-old curb sitters didn't seem to know anything about it either.

I pictured the Detroit Tigers playing their baseball games in big fields, one field called right, another center, and another left. Somewhere in those fields were walls and if you were a good player like Kell, you could get a crowd excited if you hit a ball over it.

There were no fields or walls on our street. Just curbs and yards separated by white picket fences.

One evening after dinner Dad put me in our black Model-A Ford and drove me into downtown Detroit.

"We're going to a Tigers game!"

So why we were driving into a concrete city?

It seemed to me we should be heading out to country fields, perhaps to where he took me to fly kites. We could never get a kite to stay up in the sky. But I always enjoyed running through the fields while Dad fought tangled kite string and shouted unspeakable curses to God.

On this evening, as we drove into downtown Detroit, I started feeling Dad wasn't going to find where the Tigers played baseball, and he'd soon be yelling at God again.

After he parked the old Ford on a downtown street, we walked into a building. It was mostly dark in there and I couldn't figure out how we'd be able to watch people play baseball in a dark building at night.

We walked along a dim corridor and stopped at a high counter that smelled like popcorn. Dad reached down and put a warm box of popcorn against my belly, and with the smell of popcorn and butter under my nose, we walked up a dark narrow ramp.

At the top of the ramp, men standing in front of us turned aside to let us proceed. As I stepped forward I suddenly beheld high clusters of lights that illuminated below me a calm sea of green grass met by a crescent beach of golden sand.

Men wearing white uniforms with blue hats and blue sleeves and knee-high socks rollicked with baseballs and bats.

We sat down in the second row, behind home plate. Dad told me all about three strikes, four balls, umpires, and the visitors in gray uniforms, the New York Yankees.

He showed me where left field was located and right field and center field and I gazed at their far-away walls.

During the seventh inning we got up to stretch and we sang a song together with all the people in the stadium. "Take me out to the ball game, take me out to the park, buy me some peanuts and cracker jacks, and I won't care if we ever get back."

After we stretched, the little Yankee shortstop was hit in the head by what Dad said was a line drive. He was carried off the field.

In the last inning, with the score tied and two outs, George Kell walked up in front of us, to home plate, to bat.

Dad leaned toward me and said, "He'll hit a home run over the left field wall and be a hero. If he doesn't? He'll be a bum."

George Kell swung and cracked the ball over the left field wall.

Dad and everyone else in the stadium stood up and screamed.

As George Kell slowly ran from one white sack to the next, and then straight toward me where I stood on my seat in the second row behind home plate, the sound of the crack of a bat, the roaring stadium, the smell of popcorn and hot

dogs and peanuts and cracker jacks, and the green grass and the golden base paths, all combined to make baseball seem more important to me than Christianity.

I told this story to a friend of mine about two months before my 40th birthday.

On my 40th birthday, he handed me a framed autographed photo of George Kell. The photo is inscribed, "To Paul, Best Wishes, George Kell." My friend told me that he got Kell's address from the Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, New York. He wrote Kell a letter describing my "moment," and Kell sent him the autographed photo.

The punch line for one of Dad's favorite jokes is spoken by a little boy standing in a room full of waist-high horse manure.

"With all this horse shit," the boy says while gleefully tossing the manure over his head, "there's just got to be a pony in here somewhere!"

Dad told this joke to everyone. He told the joke with such enthusiasm that sometimes I would ask him to tell it again. I may have asked him to tell that joke a dozen times. Each time he told it he pulled more laughter out of me than the time before.

He had first heard the joke from Eddie, the shoe-shine man at the St. Louis Park Sports and Health Club.

Dad would go to the club every afternoon after work, take a swim, exercise, get a massage from Joe, the blind masseur, take a steam bath, shower, and then chat awhile with Eddie, who always gave him a new joke to take home.

At the dinner table, just before dessert, one of us would ask Dad, "Do you have a new Eddie joke tonight?"

But no matter how funny they were to us, they'd almost always be soon forgotten. None of us, not even Dad, could ever remember jokes for more than a day.

Only "The Horse Shit Joke" seemed to stay.

By the time I was twenty-four and married, Mom and Dad had divorced. Dinners with my family were now only memories. So whenever he'd drive down to Mankato to visit with Alice and me, an Eddie joke was savored as much as vintage brandy.

One April weekend in 1965, when the melt from the snow flooded the Minnesota River and parts of Mankato, he came down to look around.

Enjoying the glow from his latest Eddie joke, I told him how I would like to meet the man.

Dad said he had promised both Eddie and the blind masseur, Joe, a ball game, and if I wanted to come along, I could meet both of them.

It turned out to be a Saturday. For the first time ever, the Minnesota Twins were contending for the American League Pennant. Until that summer they had always been pushovers whenever they played the Yankees, who always seemed to win the American League Pennant.

I had to take the Greyhound bus up to Minneapolis because my old 1950 Chevy wasn't running properly.

It rained all the way up Highway 169 and was still raining when I got to Dad's place.

When I arrived, he was loading up his VW Camper with beer and steaks and knives and forks and clean plates.

I said, "Hate to tell ya Dad, but there ain't gonna be any ball game today, not with all this rain."

It was the wrong thing to say.

With a big knife in one hand and a barbecue fork in the other, he turned his face up into the rain and yelled, "Goddammit God! I've waited too long for this day to have You spoil it all!"

Turning to me, he smiled and said, "There. That oughta help. Now help me get the rest of the utensils and grub into the camper. It's time to go pick up Eddie and Joe."

When we pulled up to the front of Eddie's apartment building, he was sitting on the front steps, under a big black umbrella. On his lap was a portable radio. Binoculars hung around his neck and he had a thermos in one hand.

As he walked toward us he was bent over. He seemed to be looking for something on the sidewalk. Dad said to me, "Eddie broke his back a long time ago."

Dad jumped down from the camper, opened the side door, and said, "Why don't you and Eddie sit in back, I'll fold down the table and you can serve drinks."

As we drove over to Joe's, I poured Eddie a shot of Ancient Age and he told us his latest jokes. He talked in a gravel voice and made me feel I was with Louis Armstrong.

Eddie said he brought along his portable radio in case the batteries in Joe's radio went dead.

He said that he and Joe had never been to a Twins game before and this would be the first time he'd ever gone to see the Yankees play.

Joe lived in a little white house in St. Louis Park. His wife was watching for us through the living room window.

As Dad was parking his VW Camper along the curb, Joe stepped cautiously from his front door.

Joe was wearing a black raincoat and black rain hat and carried a paper bag in one hand and his white cane in the other. He looked to be about sixty-five, about the same age as Eddie.

Joe walked all the way out to the curb without using his white cane.

I introduced myself to Joe and guided him into the back of the camper.

He squeezed in behind the table and Eddie asked him what he'd like to drink.

Joe replied, "I'm stayin' with beer today."

I gave him a Pabst from the cooler.

Joe said to Dad, "Hell, Ed, this is damn right okay. You just keep your eye on the road and we'll sit back here and make sure we don't spill our drinks."

It was nearing noon. We had one more stop before heading out to the ball park.

Although Grandpa Oscar lived just across the alley from Dad, we picked him up last because Grandpa had trouble traveling around in a vehicle. He was about eighty and ever since he broke both of his arms and both of his legs and his back and his hips in a head-on collision with a locomotive when he was an engineer for the Soo Line Railroad, he avoided any unnecessary traveling about.

Grandpa Oscar sat up in front with his son.

As we drove toward the stadium Grandpa chattered with Joe and Eddie about the Minnesota Twins.

No one talked about the rain.

We sang "Take Me Out to the Ball Game," and I was beginning to wonder if I was only imagining that Dad could hardly see past the beating windshield wipers.

About a mile from the stadium we slowed. The rain was coming down so hard it sounded as if we were inside a snare drum.

Eddie and Joe had another drink. Grandpa Oscar had one, too.

We weren't surprised by all the traffic. This was the biggest home stand of the season. If the Twins beat the Yankees, they'd be in first place, and maybe go on to win the pennant for the first time.

Joe said he listened to every Twins ball game. His favorite players were Tony Oliva, Bob Allison, and Earl Battey.

Eddie said his favorites were Don Mincher and Harmon Killebrew, and he liked the manager, Sam Mele.

Grandpa Oscar and Dad admired Zoilo Versailles' great plays at shortstop.

I liked old Mudcat Grant. He was scheduled to be the starting pitcher that day.

Their only worry seemed to be the Yankees. They still had a lot of great players, including one of the greatest of all, Mickey Mantle.

My only worry was that it would not stop raining.

No matter how much we wanted to root the Twins on to victory, deep down we had to admit we were going to this game because it was probably Mickey Mantle's last season.

Eddie said, "I just want to see him once, before he retires."

Joe opened his paper bag, took out his portable radio, and turned it on for the pre-game show on WCCO.

We had made it to the entrance of the Metropolitan Stadium parking lot.

Eddie opened a window and toasted the fans sitting in a bus that pulled up next to us.

We found a parking spot in the Baltimore Lot, not far from the stadium. There was no need to rush to our seats.

Eddie passed Dad the bottle of Ancient Age and a clean glass.

Joe put his radio on the table and we listened to the pre-game show begin while cars continued to fill up the lot.

Nobody was going into the stadium. They all just sat in their cars and waited for the rain to stop.

After Dad finished his drink he said, "Hell's bells, we didn't come out here just to sit in this parking lot. Let's go get some popcorn, peanuts, and cracker jacks."

Past the ticket takers, along one of the corridors under the stadium, we found a concession stand and loaded up. Dad bought us all Twins caps.

While we were standing at the concession eating our hot dogs, hundreds of fans started flowing past us and up the ramps toward the seats.

Dad had bought us box seats down by first base. We decided to go and see exactly where they were.

When we approached the top of the ramp, I couldn't believe what I saw: clouds were breaking up, the sky was mostly blue. The sun was shining through on the ground crew as they rolled up the canvas tarps that had been covering the lush green field.

At the top of the ramp, Dad hoisted his beer and yelled, "Play ball!"

We wiped off our seats. Joe put away his white cane, took off his raincoat, and turned up his radio.

The Twins pranced.

Before the game was half over we were enjoying a big lead and there wasn't a cloud in the sky. The Twins just kept running the base paths while Joe and Eddie laughed.

Even though Mickey Mantle played pretty in center field, when the game was over the Twins had won it by a score of something like 12 to 4.

After the game we walked back to the camper and Dad broke out the steaks.

He said, "There's no point bustin' ass tryin' to get outa this lot when it's filled with cars."

So while everyone else in the parking lot sat in their cars waiting in long lines to get out of the Baltimore Lot, we broiled steaks on a grill, drank beer, and listened to the post-game show on WCCO.

Years later they would give a name to what we were doing: tailgating. It would become commonplace rather than remarkable.

But on that sunny afternoon, even though all the people in their cars pointed and stared at us, we simply felt what we were doing was civilized and sensible.

We didn't call what we were doing tailgating. If anyone was tailgating it was those people lined bumper-to-bumper in their cars.

The lot eventually emptied. We finished our steaks. We put away the dishes. And we piled into the camper.

Near the parking lot gate we pulled in behind a big Greyhound bus and waited for the stoplight to change. We could see three men in the back seat of the Greyhound bus sitting side by side, laughing it up.

Dad shouted, "Hey, look. The guy in the middle of the back seat is Mickey Mantle!"

Eddie said, "Honk your horn Ed, maybe he'll turn around."

Grandpa Oscar leaned over toward the steering wheel and tapped out a loud honk-a-honk-honk.

Mickey Mantle turned around and looked down at our little VW Camper and waved at Dad and Grandpa.

And at Eddie, who had come forward and pressed his face up against the windshield.

Eddie waved and shouted, "Hi Mickey!"

Mickey waved again. Then he turned around and laughed some more with the two Yankees sitting next to him.

"What a guy," said Dad. "What a life! Moving around from town to town playing baseball with a bus load of guys. What a wonderful way to be a bum."

"He's no bum," said Joe. "Everyday Mickey plays with pain. Mickey belongs on crutches or in a wheelchair more than he does on a baseball field. Most people thought that after his last injury he'd never play again. If anybody's a hero, it's Mickey."

We looked back up at Mickey, who looked like he was telling a joke to the Yankees sitting around him.

And while they were all laughing Dad said, "That may be true, Joe, but I want you to know, when it comes to playing with pain, there aren't any bigger heroes than Pop here, and you and Eddie."

That was my last ball game with Dad, and I never saw Joe and Eddie again. Dad and I had been to a lot of ball games between the first and the last, but never any better than those two.