

Summer Stars

“Trust yourself when all men doubt you, but make allowances for their doubting too.”

Rudyard Kipling

I

In the rugged and remote highlands of far West Texas stands a gem of a baseball park, one built in the late 1940s for a team called the Guthrie City Cowboys by their legendary owner Knox Henderson Jr., a wealthy rancher and cattleman. Only Henderson Field survives today; it is rougher around the edges, but the place remains a legacy to the sport it was meant to be.

At games played there now, the crowds are smaller and the lights dimmer; the infield has as many bad bounces as true ones; and the outfield grass is not as lush and green as it was during the stadium’s premier years. Yet the footprints of great and ordinary ballplayers and the teams for whom they performed are stitched permanently into its soul. So too is the spirit of a man that imagined it in the first place, and ultimately linked it all together.

“Good evening, RayAnn,” he said, stepping toward the ticket window.

“Hello, Mr. Henderson,” she said. “It’s a great day for a ballgame.”

“Always,” he said. “Two, please.”

Knox Henderson Jr. was a baseball fan and he never walked through the gate without buying a ticket, regardless if he owned the team and the ballpark where they played.

In 1953, boys cuffed their jeans and girls wore dresses to school. On a larger note, Dwight Eisenhower was in his first term as president, the Republican Party controlled both houses of the U.S. Congress, and Senator Joseph McCarthy had begun his poisonous

expedition into American history; it was also the year Martin Henderson's grandfather introduced him to baseball. He was nine years old, more curious than knowledgeable, and for part of that summer his world revolved around the Guthrie City Cowboys, the field where they spun their magic, and the man he believed hung the moon.

The boy is a man now, and like most others, has found it strange how the simplicity and certainty of childhood evaporates with time and experience, as the shadow of life lengthens. That large pecan tree that grew outside of his window, the one he had climbed a thousand times as a boy and whose branches looked as if they stretched to the sky is not so large now; and he will never completely forget the day when he discovered his grandfather had darkness that blended in with his light. But after almost a half century those early memories of that particular summer loom large; mainly because they made such a permanent indentation upon a young boy's heart and mind. He figured it this way: that passion, whatever its form, always stands tall.

Knox Henderson Jr. not only treated fans to good college and minor league baseball, he also arranged for them to see some of the nation's top professional players as well. For almost a decade, between the conclusion of spring training and the start of the regular big league season, he brought in two major league clubs to play a weekend exhibition series at Henderson Field. Through the years, the Baltimore Orioles, Chicago Cubs, Chicago White Sox, Cleveland Indians, Pittsburgh Pirates and St Louis Browns made an appearance at one time or another. In 1953, Satchel Paige, the man Joe DiMaggio called the best pitcher he ever faced - came to Guthrie City.

"Hey Satchel, I'd like you to meet someone," Knox Henderson Jr. said, as the great pitcher completed his warm-up tosses along the first base side of the park.

“Hello, Mr. Knox,” he said. “I was wondering when I was going to lay eyes on you.”

“I’m sorry I missed you at the train, but I appreciate you coming, you know that,”
reaching out to shake the pitcher’s hand.

“We go back a long ways, Mr. Knox. It is the least I can do.”

“Say, this is my grandson – Martin Henderson.

“Son this is Satchel Paige, the finest pitcher I have ever seen.”

“Glad to meet you, Mr. Paige,” Martin said.

“You know your grandfather put in a good word for me a few years back – he’s a
fine man,” said Satchel Paige, resting his hand on the boy’s shoulder.

“Martin is going to be the Cowboy batboy for a time this summer and today he’ll be
on your side of the field. It’s his first game, so keep an eye on him, okay?”

“Sure enough,” Satchel Paige said, looking down and winking at the youngster.

That day an estimated 5,000 spectators - some seated, others standing, and many
perched in spaces their bodies barely fit - jammed into Henderson Field to watch the star
hurler of the St. Louis Browns pitch one inning against the Chicago White Sox.

Satchel Paige was forty-seven years old at the time and the previous year had led his
team in wins, saves and earned run average; his highlight performance coming on a hot
and muggy August afternoon in Detroit, when he shut out the Tigers 1-0, pitching all
twelve innings.

The wind blew most days in far West Texas and on that Saturday afternoon several
tornado-like dust devils sprinted across the landscape beyond the outfield walls. Martin
Henderson took a kneeling position near the on-deck circle and watched closely as the
tall, lean man pawed the dirt on the mound, toed the pitching rubber, and leaned forward

for his signal from the catcher. The pant legs of his gray flannel uniform were raised to just below his knee, exposing the dark stirrups; he wore matching sleeves and black shoes. Everyone waited anxiously for the first pitch.

Satchel Paige rocked back and began his windup, but before his right hand met his glove at chest-level it detoured and made a circular motion high above his head, the white ball almost completely hidden in his giant black hand. Bringing the ball down, he then turned his body and pushed forward, delivering the ball effortlessly toward home plate. The ball flew swiftly and accurately past the batter, and made a sound the young boy had never heard before as it settled into the catcher's leather mitt. Instinctively, Martin Henderson's eyes returned to the figure looking in from the mound. Satchel Paige struck out all three men he faced - on eleven pitches - and left the field to a standing ovation. As he crossed the first baseline he touched the bill of his cap, acknowledging their approval.

"Hey Satchel, how can you do that to those big-league hitters?" my grandfather asked, from his box seat near the dugout.

"I don't give 'em anything to hit," he said, grinning.

Satchel Paige and my grandfather had met in the 1940s at Jack Dempsey's restaurant in New York City. They liked one another from the start. After the game on Saturday the pitcher openly admired my grandfather's Stetson hat, and by the time the team boarded the train for St. Louis the following day, all players and coaches had been fitted for hats of their own. My grandfather wanted them to remember their time spent in Texas. Satchel Paige was inducted into the Hall of Fame after only six years in the major leagues. An autographed ball and glove sit on my bookshelf. After I saw him throw that first pitch, I fell for baseball – hook, line, and sinker.

Except for the ground crew, my grandfather was almost always the last to leave Henderson Field. One day outside of the park he said, "Son, look around in every direction - it's all mine."

II

Knox Houston Jr. loved baseball; everyone said so.

He was a person of enormous financial means that pursued his passion for the game with a generous spirit and fierce determination that may have surpassed even those he held for his ranch operation, civic duties, and other business interests; not to mention whiskey and race horses. He was a complex man; by most accounts a skilled negotiator that understood power and how to utilize it to his advantage. He believed America loved winning rather than whining; and he believed in education, loyalty, respect, and the land.

My grandfather was a man of average height with a stocky, muscular frame. Light of step and generally dressed in khaki trousers and starched long sleeves and with an open-road Stetson hat cocked slightly to one side, he had a jaunty air about him. He had a short attention span, but he was not self absorbed, preferring to drink with the hired hands rather than in a more formal setting. He had difficulty keeping still; even as he read a book or newspaper he tapped his foot, keeping time to the silence.

During those years in Texas, cattle, oil, cotton, wheat and land were plentiful and in demand. Along with vast amounts of property and royalties that generated hundreds of thousands of dollars each month, many ranchers had swimming pools and their own airplanes. Women from Waco, San Angelo, and Guthrie City wore the latest fashions from New York and Paris; U.S. Senators and Congressmen came to the ranch to talk business, politics, and re-election.

My grandfather liked politics, but had an independent streak that some did not understand nor embrace. That fact was never more evident than in 1952, when as a delegate to the Republican National convention in Chicago he was the only one to formally oppose the nomination of Dwight Eisenhower and Richard Nixon. “I never could latch on to that Nixon fellow,” he said, later.

In 1953, one of the state’s U.S Senators was a man named Martin Dykman, a former five-term congressman from East Texas that in 1948 had been instrumental in forming the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HCUA), an action that many believed spawned McCarthyism. My grandfather later referred to the panel as HUAC, or the House Un-American Activities Committee for its low-blow tactics. The senator was a man that wore his Southern heritage and his Baptist sense of morality on his sleeve. One summer night, I sat with my grandfather and listened to the national radio broadcast of one of those Senate committee hearings. Senator Dykman was the main questioner; a black writer by the name of Langston Hughes was the witness.

Satchel Paige had called my grandfather earlier in the day to alert him of the broadcast. He had introduced my grandfather to Mr. Hughes one night in New York.

Senator Dykman: State your name for the record?

Mr. Hughes: James Langston Hughes.

Senator Dykman: When were you born and do you still live in Missouri?

Mr. Hughes: I was born in 1902. No sir, New York City is my home now.

Senator Dykman: Other than writing, do you pursue any other occupation?

Mr. Hughes: No, sir.

Senator Dykman: Have you ever been a member of the Communist party?

Mr. Hughes: No, sir.

Senator Dykman: Do you think some of the poems you have written recently are helpful to the country?

Mr. Hughes: The works you have named sir, are not very representative of my career.

Senator Dykman: Do they portray a true view of American life?

Mr. Hughes: They are views of objectives we seek racially, and therefore ought to be acknowledged.

Senator Dykman: Mr. Hughes, we are not on the same plane at all. Certainly they might have a view as to what we seek racially and all that. But the question is: Should these poems which call for the Soviet form of government, poems which idealize Lenin, certainly a poem which calls for everybody to get up and sing the Internationale, be allowed to breathe in America?

Mr. Hughes: Yes sir, I think they should. It indicates freedom of the press in our country, which is a thing we are proud of.

Senator Dykman: Have you ever been a Communist without joining the Communist party?

Mr. Hughes: No, sir.

Senator Dykman: What does a Communist mean to you?

Mr. Hughes: A communist means to me - to be a member of the Communist party who accepts the discipline of the Communist party and follows the various changes in the party line.

Senator Dykman: Are you then a believer in the Soviet form of government?

Mr. Hughes: For the Soviets or whom?

Senator Dykman: A believer in the Soviet form of government for everybody.

Mr. Hughes: I am opposed to the limitations placed on freedom by the Soviet Union, but from my point of view what matters most is that the form of government respect the rights of minorities and poor people, that everyone has the chance to advance equally.

Senator Dykman: Will you provide to this committee the names of other men and women that are or might have been members of the Communist party?

Mr. Hughes: No, sir. I am not qualified to do so.

Senator Dykman: Are you prepared for the consequences of that decision?

Mr. Hughes: I do not know what you mean, sir.

Senator Dykman: Mr. Hughes, I think we will suspend questioning for the evening. You are still under subpoena and may be called to testify later.

Mr. Hughes: Will you tell me sir, about expenses?

Senator Dykman: About expenses?

Mr. Hughes: Yes, sir. They are covered by the committee while I am here, right?

Senator Dykman: Under the rule, the transportation is paid and there is an allowance of nine dollars a day while you are here.

Mr. Hughes: From whom do I get it?

Senator Dykman: From the Treasury. The committee is now recessed until tomorrow.

My grandfather sat there with a whiskey in hand and his anger boiling.

“That son-of-a-bitch, he said, switching off the radio. “There are some Baptists out there that ought to have been held under water a bit longer.”

Throughout the summer we listened to more of the hearings held in the U.S. Senate. It was unforgettable in ways that I did not completely understand, in a place far, far away.

III

The 666 brand reached into far West Texas at about the same time the Southern Pacific Railroad began to expand across the state. My great grandfather, Knox Henderson Sr., jumped his first cattle herd from the railroad cars onto the open grass ranges of Guthrie County in 1912, and days later purchased the land to start the Three Sixes ranch. At its height, more than 35,000 cattle carried the 666 brand, and grazed on more than 400,000 acres of land. Born to the ranching life in 1915, my grandfather took the reins of the Three Sixes during the late 1930s. He lived there his entire life.

After World War II, baseball in America was in its heyday and although the number of cities fielding major league clubs was far less than today, plenty of players were plying their trade at the minor-league level. In 1946, Knox Henderson Jr. bought the Guthrie City Cotton Kings and the ball field where they played for three thousand dollars. The Cotton Kings were a rag-tag team of local boys and their ball yard, Legion Park, was a place held together by a combination of tin, chicken wire, and unfinished wooden planks. Neither would last long.

“You know son, I’m not a baseball fan,” Knox Henderson Sr. said, looking at the old ballpark his boy had just purchased. “But if there is anything you need, let me know – I’m sure we have worked on more challenging projects together, but right now I cannot think of any.”

“Thanks Pop.”

Later, as the older Henderson boarded the train back to San Antonio, where he headed the Southwestern Cattleman's Association, he said, "Son, let me just say this: if you plan to build a baseball field or anything else for that matter and put the 666 brand on it, do it right."

Knox Henderson Jr. took it from there, and on a summer day in 1947 opened Henderson Field and introduced the Guthrie City Cowboys to the public. At an estimated cost of \$1.25 million - more than that of Wrigley Field in Chicago - no stone had been left unturned. My grandfather had a reputation for getting things done, and Henderson Field went beyond getting it done.

Surrounded by a ten-foot wall of native red stone that workers dug from a quarry on the ranch and whose front entrances were guarded by several yellow rose gardens, the park turned into a master work of art. Boxcars filled with a special blend of Bermuda grass and red dirt were shipped to Guthrie City by train from Georgia and carpeted the playing surface. Iron and steelworkers from San Antonio carefully built gates that were adorned by small lanterns and clusters of inlaid baseballs, complete with red-painted seams. More than three thousand seats fit perfectly beneath the covered grandstand and each season ticket holder had their names hand-printed across the back of their seats. Knox Henderson Jr. checked on every detail, including the park's monumental dimensions: 340 feet down each line, 370 feet to the power alleys, and 430 feet to straight-away center field.

Both teams that played their games at Henderson Field – the Guthrie City Cowboys and the Bowie State Lobos – wore red and white uniforms, the official colors of the Three Sixes. The Cowboy players were professionals, mostly bonus babies signed by the Boston

Red Sox organization. Their agreed sponsorship was critical to my grandfather's decision to purchase the Cotton Kings in the first place. Except for the 666 brand in two places on the outside of the stadium, Henderson Field never had a single piece of advertising on the property. Through his ballpark and his players, my grandfather shared with others his love of baseball and the intimacy and excitement he felt the game provided.

In the summer of 1953, I assumed my duties as the Cowboy batboy for the month of June. At Henderson Field I watched great plays, snagged balls in the outfield during batting practice, helped mow the grass and without a doubt, had the best time of my short life. The ranch was a constant buzz of activity, even more so during baseball season. I rode horses, helped build fences, learned about fly-fishing, cooking steaks, and expanded my vocabulary. I also learned to appreciate the quiet sounds of the ranch and the songs of the summer stars. I dreaded going home to Fort Worth

IV

Also that summer, a scout telephoned Tom Chandler, the coach of the Cowboys.

"I think we ought to bring the kid down here," Chandler said.

"Where's he from?" asked Knox Henderson Jr.

"North Carolina – he's just out of high school and I know he is going to be raw, but I trust the scout that told us about him – he has a keen eye for talent."

"Okay, Tom."

The young prospect arrived by train two days later with all his things in a cardboard box. Coach Chandler took a hard look at him the next day and recommended that the Cowboys offer him a contract. Knox Henderson Jr. agreed. Two weeks later, he made his

first start against the Sinton Oilers. In the third inning, Coach Chandler and the Cowboy catcher visited the mound.

“They’re knocking you around pretty good,” Tom Chandler said, placing his hand on the pitcher’s shoulder.

“Coach, can I say something?” the young man said.

“Sure.”

“Can I just throw harder?”

“What do you mean, throw harder?” Coach Chandler asked.

“Well, I’ve never thrown hard yet because since the day I got here you said not to so until you gave me the word.”

“Son, I think it is time you throw as hard as you can,” said Chandler.

Gaylord Perry did not allow another hit in the game and went 12-3 for the Cowboys that summer. The following year he played in AAA and the rest as they say – is history. The Cowboys had a fine summer, going 45-19 and winning the Class A Rookie League Championship.

I will forever see my grandfather as I did that summer, especially our times at the baseball park. At dinner, we often spoke of baseball, but he asked about my dreams and my life in Fort Worth. Not many adults listen to kids; he did.

Later, I found out my grandparents did not have a perfect marriage; that my grandfather had a mistress that traveled with him on the road. He probably lived too hard and I know he continued to have his battles with politicians, the university, and the bottle. My grandfather was a maverick; however, there were just so many things about him that I

liked, including his imperfections. Sometimes those are the things that set us apart, that make us unique, that help us learn – that are part of our beauty.

Following the 1959 season, the Red Sox withdrew their affiliation with the Cowboys and moved the team to a small town in New England. The official explanation was that they wanted the rookies closer to the parent club. That same year, Bowie State, based upon the recommendation of the president and its Board of Regents, disbanded the baseball program. Knox Henderson Jr. was devastated. “These things have Dykman’s fingerprints all over it,” he said.

V

My grandfather passed on in 1966 and is buried on his ranch. By far West Texas standards, it is only a stone’s throw away from the other place in his life that meant so much to him – Henderson Field. Among others, Satchel Paige and Langston Hughes came to the service. Senator Dykman sent his regrets.

Today the Three Sixes is about a quarter of its original size, but remains a working ranch, specializing in prize Herefords and registered Quarter horses. Oil and gas wells still pump on the horizon.

There is a high school baseball tournament scheduled for Henderson Field this weekend. In the summers, Babe Ruth and American Legion teams use it several times a week. I wonder if the boys know anything about the place or understand the shadows of the past. I suspect they are not aware, just as I was not at their age; I do know that as long as kids dream of wearing a baseball uniform, of throwing and hitting balls, and playing catch with their parents, Henderson Field will remain a magical place.

“Baseball,” said Knox Henderson Jr., on opening day in 1947, “represents the keenest and most wholesome of sports – it is our national game.”