

## EXCERPT FROM MEMOIRS OF A LONGSHOT

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*INTRO: This has to do with a period in the early '30's when my father was employed by Coca-Cola. He toured the nation flying the weird Coca-Cola Autogyro and lecturing on aviation, a P.R. gambit of Coke.*

EXCERPT: My folks and I moved into a furnished apartment on Nob Hill in San Francisco. It was October of 1934, and we were to stay in the Golden State until the public relations “gold” was deemed to be depleted.

It might take awhile, because situated in California and ready to do battle for the cause was one who was to be Coca-Cola's door-opener extraordinaire. This was a gentleman who was one of Coke's biggest stockholders, one of the world's most vivid and recognizable characters, and perhaps the supreme baseball player of all time: Ty Cobb, “The Georgia Peach.”

Cobb had retired from baseball several years earlier and was simply clipping the numerous coupons he had caused to come his way. He was a very astute investor. As he had made money through his career, he had socked it away, steadily and significantly, in Coca-Cola stock; he was a very wealthy and somewhat grateful man.

Coke had assiduously steered clear of publicity associating the Cobb name with their pristine product. While he was enormously admired as a ballplayer, he would not exactly have been a strong candidate to win the “Albert Schweitzer Humanitarian Award.” During his playing days he had the disposition of a piranha and the aggressiveness of a pit bulldog. He adored a fight.

But now Coke had perceived the ideal role for Ty. And they sought his cooperation. And he pledged it. He was to be the California host for Captain Bill Campbell. Who could be more ideal to get him in the right places (and perhaps some of the wrong ones)? If Cobb picked up the phone, or knocked on any door, he could make things happen.

The great hitter had little to occupy himself with at the time. He whiled away the days hunting, drinking, and looking for someone to pick a fight with. He was intrigued with aviation, he loved Georgia, his home state . . . and here came a lively young fellow from Rome, Georgia, who could fly the hell out of this funny-looking flying machine. It was a splendid match.

They had a lot in common. They quickly became great drinking companions. My father loved to hunt, and that helped. Further, Bill Campbell, like the rest of America, hero-worshipped the ferocious old Detroit Tiger. Cobb's reputation for pugnacity did not make him easy, but it did make him fascinating (as one might admire the qualities of a gamecock or a pit bulldog).

All in all, the two new friends cut a wide swath through California, and the Coca-Cola public relations aspirations in that important state were more than realized. My mother and I

were certainly not much involved in the activities of Cobb and my Dad. She was happy not to be, and there was certainly no reason for the pilot's little son to be in the equation.

Until, that is, there came a time that November when Ty Cobb invited my father and family to attend the East-West Football Classic at Kezar Stadium in San Francisco. We were to come to lunch at the Cobb home and then drive to the game with the Cobbs. Mr. and Mrs. Cobb and their son Jimmy, age thirteen, were to represent that family, while my Dad and I would be the only Campbells. My mother was not a Cobb enthusiast, and decided to take a pass on the occasion.

I was keen to see the game, but at my young age hanging out with Ty Cobb, the celebrity, would not have rung my chimes. And there was a decided darkness about him and his name that even I sensed. I had certainly picked up on some of the conversational nuances about him. But still my wariness was unusual—and maybe I'm imagining it now, after increased awareness of the legend of the man has had its impact. He was really not a fearsome man physically. His countenance could have belonged to a druggist, or a judge, or a doctor. But even I grasped the fact that where there was all that smoke, there must be some fire. Most of the entire world knew: he was some kind of mean son of a bitch!

Dad and I showed up at their rather impressive estate in the suburbs of San Francisco. After the adults had a drink or two, we were served lunch, and then it was off to the game on a rather dreary, gray day.

We had wonderful seats right on the "50," of course. All was going nicely, and it was a great occasion. Cobb was quite jolly and had been a perfect host. Then in the second quarter it started to rain lightly. Most of the fans had brought umbrellas, and they opened them up and kept them open during a shower of maybe five minutes. Then it stopped raining, and the umbrellas throughout the stadium were closed. All but those belonging to two men in our section. They had been imbibing heavily, and they were seated two rows directly in front of us. These guys had been pretty annoying right along, but now the umbrellas were particularly effective in making them quite obnoxious.

Their neighbors suffered in silence for awhile. Then Cobb leaned over the row just in front of him and—in a pretty civil manner, really—tapped one of the men on the shoulder and said (and I can hear it now!), "Say, fellas, how 'bout putting your umbrellas down so a paying customer can see the game?"

That started it.

The two drunks had struck pay dirt. Now they had one clearly defined, responsive target. They immediately turned and gave Cobb the finger, accompanied by considerable hostile repartee. This kept on, with Cobb, his face as red as a beet, not saying a word.

But on and on it went. Everyone within twenty feet of us was tuned in to an unpleasant situation.

Finally, after the two revelers unleashed a particularly offensive tirade at Cobb, a fan in front of them, fed up himself, turned and said, "Boys, you ought to know . . . that guy you're getting so tough with back there is Ty Cobb."

WHAP! Those umbrellas came down like a shot.

The umbrella owners then gave a pitiful, little obsequious wave back at Cobb as if to say, "I hope this is satisfactory now, sir!" Then they hunched their shoulders to make themselves as inconspicuous and inoffensive as possible. Indeed, they would have liked very much at that point to disappear from the face of the earth.

They remained that way, silent and still as church mice, until the half. Then they jumped up and bounded up the steps and through the exit.

They had no more than cleared the area, when Cobb nonchalantly stood up, stretched a little, and said, “Jimmy, how about going down and getting us some Coca-Colas?” Jimmy left on his assignment.

No more than sixty seconds later—with a quick glance at Mrs. Cobb (who knew what was coming!) —he said, “I wonder what’s keeping Jimmy? I’d better go down and see where that boy is.” With that, he rushed out of there.

Mrs. Cobb immediately looked over at my father and said, “Oh Bill, I wish you’d follow Ty! I just know he’s going to do something to those two men.” That was not the most surprising news my father had ever received. He told me to sit tight and then he was gone, leaving Mrs. Cobb, nervously twisting her hankie, and me.

My father descended into the lower regions of the stadium to the men’s room. When he approached it he saw Cobb hiding behind a gigantic, square concrete pillar, peeking out toward the exit door. About that time, the two men, considerably more sober than they had been, stepped out.

Ty pounced. He throttled one in each hand, and was in the process of selecting the one he was going to annihilate first, when my father rushed up. After quite a bit of cajoling, amidst a steady stream of apologies, their release was secured.

Even though there was no more rain during the second half, there were two empty seats near us.