

Hollywood Stars

by Steven Gowin



Cleveland signed Bob Feller in 1935. In 1936, they plucked the kid off his Iowa farm and launched him into the baseball stratosphere. He was 17 years old and had yet to finish high school.

Your Uncle Howard and I listened to Dutch Reagan re broadcast big league baseball on WHO Radio when we were little. He'd call the play action off the wire complete with sound effects. The son of a bitch turned out to be a Republican, but WHO baseball was better than nothin'. I remember him announcing the Feller deal.

I never played much ball. Didn't get to college. Barely travelled. About the time I would've been on a high school team, the war was on. The Heater from Van Meter had volunteered for the Navy in the North Atlantic, and Howard was soon totin' an M1 in France. Your granddad was real sick at home and although I was just a kid, I had to keep the farm going. I just barely did graduate, myself.

After the war, when he'd rejoined the Indians, Feller came back every fall for a big "Homecoming" party sponsored by Meyer Brothers Oil. In the afternoon he'd pitch three innings for our men's

team and three for our opponent from the county seat. That kept the games fair. Howard was back too, with a Bronze Star; he led off and played third. I managed the team.

Before he died in 1947, Dad sent me to Long Beach to stay with Uncle Merle until I could get on my feet out there. Said the farm was no place for me. Howard could look after it and Mom now that he was back. Howard wanted to farm it anyway, and Mom said it couldn't support us all. That was fine by me.

Sometimes I'd see a couple games a week up there on Fairfax Avenue. It was all Pacific Coast League action. Guys were headed up to the bigs; guys were comin' down... Saw Casey Stengel manage the Oakland Oaks and Lefty O'Doul with the Frisco Seals. They called our boys the "Twinks" as in "twinkle twinkle." Pinky Woods and Fuzz Johnson wore the white uniforms with red piping and big red stars... our Hollywood Stars.

When Howard called me back from LA, I'd only been out there nine months. He was fair and blue eyed, a Meyer, like Mom, and he thought he was a businessman, like her brothers. The Meyer brothers ran a dozen gas stations and a fuel oil business; they had corn and hogs, a hardware store. They'd loaned Dad just enough to start that farm the year Feller'd gone to Cleveland, but not enough to keep it going until it *got* going... damned cheap Krauts.

Howard's troubles didn't surprise me. I'm dark, and I brood like Dad; we're MacLeans, Scots Irish; we knew that that poor ground was hopeless. Howard couldn't go it alone, couldn't handle the work, couldn't handle the business. Mom had wanted it, she'd pushed the idea, a Meyer idea. But Howard'd made it through the Battle of the Bulge... a hero, like Bob Feller. So I went back; what else could I do?

Besides, he wasn't right yet. One July Four we'd gone into Des Moines, Sec Taylor Stadium, for a Bruins versus Omaha game. The

club celebrated “our returning heroes” afterwards with lots of fireworks. But hell, after one big aerial bomb, I looked around, and that poor son of a bitch was gone. I found him under the stadium seats a few seconds later... weeping, shivering, scared to death. I held him until he settled down.

No shock, Dad's farm was bust after the next fall's harvest. The Meyers took it over, bulldozed the house. I'd met your mom that year though, at one of the Homecomings, and you came along a couple years later. Howard went to work at the grain elevator in DeSoto and did alright, and after a little while, he *was* alright. I set up implements, cultivators, and corn pickers for Van Meter Motor.

I'd dreamt of going back to California, but then there was your sister, and this and that... Like I said, I never did play ball, but I managed the men's town team right on into the 60's. We'd usually play six innings, but sometimes we'd just play on into the twilight, with the swallows and bats swooping around overhead, trying to catch a mosquito.

Afterwards came the barbecue... The boys and their wives and kids ate and talked into the evening. Those cicadas buzzed until dark; then it was crickets. If you weren't on one of the folding chairs, you sat at the picnic table or in a canvas back chaise lounge. The women had Newports; the men smoked Camels.

Ten PM or so, somebody'd look skyward through the elm branches and pipe up, “Musta taken some pretty good gas to get that pill all the way up there, all the way into outer space, I guess.”

Everybody'd gaze up then, without a word, and catch site of a tiny speck of light, a bright pinpoint, maybe a Sputnik or the Echo Satellite, blasting across the dark, high up above.

But I knew what it really was. God damn it all to hell, shining up there far into the night, peppering through the heavens, that was the baseball comet... one of the Hollywood Stars.

