

CHAPTER FOUR:
“I GOT A HOME IN THAT ROCK...”



Coach Bob Jones

Well, each day after that was another day—no men from Mars, nothing unusual but calculus and chemistry and sociology; then the afternoon came when the boxing team gathered in the gym for exercising and batting each other with 10-ounce gloves.

The exercises were an afternoon all to themselves. The terrain is hilly, and we still ran with 5-pound weights in each hand. The first part was easiest. We went down a road behind the gym that ran through a hog farm. All the hogs were behind fences that appeared fragile compared to the fat animals that slopped in the mud, contained by the fences. The hogs all weighed hundreds of pounds. I was apprehensive running by them but never mentioned it because many of the boxers were from farms and accustomed

to dealing with monsters such as these.

Just beyond the hog farm was an open field that had in it, that afternoon, a cow and her calf. I ran too close to the calf whose momma galloped toward us with, I was sure, no good in mind. Fortunately, there was one tree in the field, and the big boxer rapidly became an expert tree climber and perched out of reach of the cow that just wanted to get her daughter away from a stranger, and when they were a safe distance away, I came down and ran toward Cemetery Hill. The downslope of the hill led to the gym where calisthenics then started. Following this torture came nine rounds of boxing, usually with a man or two your weight and one heavier. There would have been one lighter except there was none. Bob Jones coached, supervised and taught during the nine rounds each day.

In addition to the above, three bantamweights sparred with each other. The first of my own weight was Teddy Boselli, the number one bantamweight. He was a perpetual motion machine who at times seemed to have four hands. Standard boxing that I was taught at the Charleston YMCA wasn't effective against Boselli. There was no problem jabbing him in the nose or hitting him with a right to the belly. It just didn't seem to make much difference. He kept on going, apparently unaware of my punching and without fatigue for all three rounds.

I thought that I might be a better professional boxer than Teddy because I did not think it possible to continue his pace for more than three rounds. But I never asked to go ten rounds with him.

Next up was a welterweight or heavyweight. Lauren Dreisbach was the welterweight. He was a good student, a pleasant person, and a very good boxer. Every afternoon he out-pointed me. In spite of his being twenty pounds heavier, he was stronger and faster than I was. Unfortunately, he had a glass jaw, and after an intercollegiate bout, he was knocked down and didn't recognize anyone, including his father, and remained semicomatose for five to ten minutes. That ended his boxing career. Coach Jones had a one-KO rule. After one, you were not allowed to box again.

My other partner was our heavyweight, Warren Wilson, who

weighed 185 when he was in good shape, which was always. Warren knew that if he hit a man 65 pounds lighter, he might kill him, so he practiced his footwork, slapped me when he wanted to and permitted me to act like a champion, jabbing him at will and occasionally hitting him with a right to his gut, not too hard, though, because there is an end to good nature. I remembered fighting a heavy in the Charleston YMCA. Being a smart ass, I hit him in the belly as hard as I could to drive him back. He then hit me with a left to my middle and, when I jackknifed forward, carried me to the side of the gym where, after a few minutes, I could breathe again. I learned to be very careful with heavier boxers no matter how sweet they were.

At the end of the afternoon, we hardly had the energy for a shower, but usually made it.



The Boxing Team (Williams is front row, fourth from right.)



In our room, Dan was in a tizzy. "I'm sorry we get newspapers," he said. "The president has suggested that we strengthen the Navy, but there is strong opposition to this in Congress. This

is in the face of Charleston's Alfred Von Kolnitz's warning that World War I had discredited the illusion that the Atlantic was insurmountable and that America could put a million men in uniform overnight. In the meantime, the Italians and British moved toward a closer relationship while, at the same time, Italian and German ties remained as close as ever. What's going on? The people are jockeying for as strong a position as possible, should war come, and it most likely will."

"I'm not as apprehensive about European politics as you. The Atlantic is not a perfect barrier, but it can buy time if need be. So far none of those people have threatened us, and I can't see anything in the immediate future that indicates they will. I'll continue to pull for the football team, be thankful for the fact that I eat food instead of the major dining room swill, and curse the school military. Lighten up, man! We seem to be getting over a major depression, and things look good to me."

"I wish I had your attitude. But they try to make anything they do seem necessary. For instance, Italy is appealing to the League of Nations to justify their wrecking Ethiopia for no reason that I can see except to prepare their fighting forces for a larger war in the future."

"Dan, I know what you are trying to tell me. But I'm going to enjoy living until all hell breaks loose. I remain confident that the President and Congress know a lot more than we do and will do whatever is necessary to protect us.

"More practical is the fact that my last calculus quiz was terrible, and I don't want to end up selling pencils in the streets. I could also use the very close company of a gal, but, being in this place with no car, you might as well be a monk."



The two most important things to students were football and the military establishment. If you could stand up like a soldier, were fairly handsome and did not have bad grades, you became something with a title in the military that used pre-World War I drilling and tactics. The first sergeant ruled each company

under a company commander, and corporals commanded each squad. The cadet colonel was the top of the cadets' military heap and he and the rest of the student military were backed by the faculty insofar as campus discipline was concerned.

Everyone had to have relief from this organization, and mine was in a little frame house owned by Professor Robertson, who had started the department of chemistry. His son, Ben, was the school's most prominent literary figure. Ben had worked for the New York *Times* and had been the Washington correspondent of the Associated Press during Roosevelt's administration, had reported in Java and Honolulu, and knew every politician locally and nationally in the world. He was proud of his family who had come to this continent before the formation of the United States and looked down on North Carolina because they hadn't joined the union until 1668.

His family believed that the sun was oriented toward Clemson and during the night, unfortunately, brought light to the Chinese. His family was Baptist, all active in the church, and believed that all the little white churches in South Carolina belonged to them. His father hated banks that would loan money for three months, then foreclose; and the Robertson family would rather survive on grits and gravy than borrow to eat well. As a matter of fact, even in good times, when the price of cotton was high, grits were a part of their breakfast, dinner, and supper.

Ben lived in various parts of the world but would always come back home to rest for a while and talk to his family and friends. He had interviewed everyone who was important in the world, and who Earl Mazo interviewed for the Clemson *Tiger*, the school paper, and became a friend. He invited Earl and a few others, including Strom Thurmond, to the little white house, along with Wilton Hall, editor of the Anderson *Independent* and a political power in that part of the state, as well as a few faculty members, to talk about the places he had been. Ben was a great writer and would have been a wonderful gossip columnist. While he lived in Buckingham Palace, he was interested in the king's daily in-and-out relationships with the queen. He was more interested in what went on between the servants and back-stairs gossip. The topics

of conversation between Mr. Thurmond and Mr. Hall gave all of us the in's and out's of that part of the state.

Ben had lived with Manuel Quezon in the Philippines and was fascinated by the happy relationship between a white husband and a black wife. The most frequent conversations concerned black and white relationships and how the blacks could occupy their society with dignity with no malice directed toward them. The evenings always ended with a wonderful meal and a gradual decrease of chitchat as guests left for home.

Among the family characteristics of the Robertson family was a quick temper with arguments sometimes settled with pistols. These were family matters and police were never called. This was a trait that, so far as one could tell, Ben did not share. The shootings did not lead to lifelong hatreds but were accepted as one way to settle a heated argument and separate from the multitudinous relationships.

If Ben had lived (he was killed in a plane crash at age 33), he would have been a great novelist. Besides what he did write, his sense of humor and his instincts as a gossip were memorable. In *Red Hills and Cotton*, he describes his restless family. It is a long description and cannot be epitomized, but the following is as close as one gets to his family feeling.

He says, "We are like kites in the hills of Carolina, like ships riding at anchor. We have our cotton fields, or big wooden houses. Someone is always keeping the home place. Someone is always there and no matter how seldom or unexpectedly we may come in, we know someone will rise and give us welcome. We can stay for a day, a week, or a month. We can sit in a corner if we like and read a book, or we can milk the cows or feed the chickens or shoot squirrels in the oaks along the spring branch. It is a great comfort to a rambling person to know that somewhere there is a permanent home. Perhaps it is the most final of the comforts they ever really know. Perhaps that is why one of our favorite hymns is that spiritual, 'I Got a Home in That Rock Don't You Know.'"

Perhaps that is not a description of the entire family, but it is compatible to Ben's leaving for months or years and always com-

ing home to his rock, and that is why people of stature always looked forward to his coming—Strom Thurmond, Professor B. O. Williams, his cousin and classmate, and many faculty members.

Walking home with Earl after hearing Ben recount his experiences with the king and queen of England, I said, “It is hard to believe that Ben was educated in this isolated school, goes out and talks to the world’s important people and comes back here reminiscing about them like a country bumpkin who was fortunate to get to see the world’s leaders.”



Professor John Lane (English) and Ben Robertson

“I don’t see anything unusual about that,” said Earl. “He’s a man who knows exactly who he is, part of a great big family that possesses the sun and lets China use it part-time. He couldn’t be anything but what he is.”



Transportation in the 1930s could be difficult. Few students were blessed with automobiles and there was no formal parking lot. One of the fortunates was classmate Hertz Warren who parked near a pump house close to the football field. It was an elderly Nash, but you could squeeze six people in it, and it always performed reliably. On holidays with enough time to get to Charleston and back, Hertz would bring the old jalopy in front of second barracks, where most of us lived, and, load up. Salvadore Sottile was always first on the spot, and, his brother Vincent and Buster Brown and me and occasionally one from the islands because there were not many of them and they had the additional problem of getting from Charleston to whatever island was their home. They usually elected to stay in school until Christmas or the summer break.

Conversation was nonstop, and, with complaints, they were told to take the bus. No one ever did. The bus to Charleston stopped at every crossroad, using most of the vacation time. Besides, they had the bad habit of charging a fare that few of us could afford.

Salvadore Sottile was always the first to ask if the auto would make it this time. He was told that he could be taken to the bus station, allowing with his wide rear-end room for an extra person in the back seat. Sottile replied that he would do his duty of holding down the back seat all the way home and would not charge for the service.

“Would you guys cut the crap! Nobody I know would mistake you for Jack Benny or any other comedian, and if he did, he’d get locked up in the Columbia nut house.”

To break the subsequent silence, I told of riding the bus with Shad Bryant, who spit at citizens on the side of the road, catching them in the face with the bus doing 50. That seemed like something requiring emulation, so Buster unloaded from the front and scored a bull’s-eye on Salvadore in the back. It seemed a real accomplishment but Salvadore reacted unpleasantly.

"Aw, Sally, you know I didn't intend to do that," replied Buster. "Besides, if I could regularly spit in a curve like that, I'd probably open a sideshow and make more money in a day than you fuckers could get together in your lifetimes."



I hadn't talked to Bill for a while and decided to give him a ring and see if I could make a visit. The answer was positive, so I walked to the little white house.

"What brings you here, Art?"

"Well, I went home for the weekend, and was surprised at the aggressive and profane behavior of the guys in the car. Secondly, I am becoming more and more concerned with the manipulations of Austria, Italy and Germany. Italy is trying to make the world believe that their war in Ethiopia was honest and pure when they really destroyed a country too weak to defend itself and Italy prepares for what I think will be the next war."

"Well," said Bill, "least important is the action in the car. Everyone has a percent bad in them, some 10%, some more. But men, unsupervised, are going to use the bad percent. You are lucky to have everything end with horseplay, not violence. In dealing with people, use your 90% until situations make it impossible to continue peacefully. This is why men shoot their wives after years of unhappiness and why the wife is more sensitive to a long-term unpleasant environment than the husband. I'm curious about why more wives don't shoot husbands. Anyhow, the behavior in the car was horseplay, a substitute for something more unpleasant."

"As far as the second part of the question, Europe remains an enigma. Germany wants the whole thing, but, until circumstances make it impossible, they'll act like a civilized country. Given the turmoil in Spain and the mid-European countries, I believe that Germany is waiting for a reasonable chance."