

Deep in the Heart of Texas

“It’s around here somewhere,” Bill Veeck said. He was driving, his arm leaning out the open window with his sport shirt wide open, happy for the sunlight and dry air. “When Josh swings that lumber,” he said, again to no one, for he knew that his friend Sam Dailey had stopped listening long ago, “you’re going to see some fireworks. The greatest ballplayer in history, Negro or otherwise.” Though he was behind the wheel, Veeck wasn’t paying attention to the silver mirages shellacking the road, the heat undulating on the horizon, the sun-scorched countryside, or the abandoned farmhouse with a *V for Victory* sign on its cracked front window. It was late November 1943, and he was trying to see into the near future, trying his damndest to imagine the coming storm and reassure his friend that it wouldn’t blow their house down. “Look, Sam, after they hit the diamond, after all those Josh Gibson home runs, and after we steamroll our way to the pennant, no one will care that they’re Negroes. It’s all baseball, Sam. That’s what’ll count.”

The car hit a pothole and Veeck grimaced. He wore an artificial leg just below the right knee and was doing his best to ignore the pain, a difficult task as the apple-green Packard’s shot springs and the lousy roads meant every rut sent shock waves from his soles to his molars. A man of tics, about every five minutes he would shake a cigarette from the pack and light it against the one in his mouth. A case of warm beer rattled on the front seat between the two men, and Veeck would methodically slurp from a bottle, then stick a cigarette in his mouth, inhale with all his might, and bellow out smoke in great blasts. A smile brightened his face, a grin as wide as the open collars he wore in defiance against a world of ties. Still sporting his Marine-issue buzz cut, which brought out the blond in his thinning red hair,

Veeck had the look of a blue-collar man: a face weathered from constant sun, aging him beyond his thirty years, and a voice scratched from having to shout over the clatter of the El trains of his hometown Chicago. Bill Veeck Jr. was the youngest man ever to own a major league baseball team.

The Packard roared over hills, drifted dangerously over the loose gravel, killing rattlesnakes sunning themselves on the road, and coiling dust in its wake.

“Slow down,” Sam begged, grasping the door. He was pale as lard, his stomach burning from indigestion, and looked like he was steaming in his suit and tie. As they raced through the Texas countryside, Sam tried to keep his nausea at bay, gulping air. “God, Bill, they’ll love us in St. Louis,” he croaked sarcastically. “You think people will want to see a ball game with the National Guard hanging around?”

“National Guard—?”

“Yes, National Guard. You don’t think people are going get a bit angry about this whole thing? People fight at ball games over a blown call. We’re going to need police, firemen, probably the Guard to keep order. At first I thought, okay, this is another circus act. Fun and games. And here I am, going along with this, this . . . I don’t even know what you call it, driving all over hell’s half-acre to look for phantoms.” Sam’s stomach turned, and he gasped again, but held his hand up to tell Veeck to keep his mouth shut. After a moment, he continued. “Let me ask you this: Do you really think the fans can handle Negroes playing ball with whites? On the same field? Oh, not just in Philadelphia. In St. Louis. New York, Detroit—Bill, Negroes burned down half the city this year! And we don’t know the character of these players. It’s not the drinking or the womanizing that bothers me,” Sam said, though both bothered him a great deal. “What if they’re violent? What if they’re gamblers? Landis won’t tolerate Negroes, but he’ll wreck everything if there’s gambling.” Sam stopped. From the corner of his eye he could see Bill had quit listening and was looking a bit pained himself. *Good*, Sam thought. I can’t be the only one living in reality. “Integration,” he added, hoping his last jab would hit Bill where it hurt. “I just hope you know that this great experiment of yours doesn’t set integration—in baseball and everywhere else—*back* a few years.” With those last words dangling between them, they both stared out into the middle distance.

It had started with that phone call in late September. Around two in the morning, and Sam figured his father was finally dead. But the noise coming out of the receiver told him right off it was Bill. There were no introductions, no “I’m back from the war!”, nothing about the injury, the lost leg, no “How are you?” or “How’s business?” Through the jumble Sam heard, “Philadelphia Athletics!” He heard the price, heard the job offer, and then heard the click. Within two weeks he and Bill Veeck owned the American League franchise known on paper as the Professional Base Ball Club of Philadelphia.

Back in the day they called Sam Dailey a Cornell man, though you’d be hard pressed even then to find anyone who really knew what that meant. It could have referred to his habit of trying to maintain a look of serious commercial importance at all times: the days were few when Sam wasn’t attired in a sharp jacket, crisp white shirt, conservative tie. Perhaps it referred to the crew cut he had trimmed once a week, or the black horn-rimmed glasses. The whole works framed by a squared jaw, topping a portly frame. Mostly, being a Cornell man meant that he’d mention Cornell at least once a day.

Veeck had waited all his life for this opportunity. William Veeck Jr. had grown up in the dusty corridors of Wrigley Field, where his father, the stoic William Veeck Sr. had served as president of the Chicago Cubs in the 1920s and 1930s. The senior Veeck taught his son everything about baseball, and while young Bill eschewed the suits and ties of his father, he kept the lessons close to his heart. The elder Mr. Veeck was an innovator, a man who understood that you needed to build a winning team *and* provide some fun. He proposed interleague games, started Ladies’ Day, and was the first to broadcast games on the radio. “Bill,” he once told his son while they counted the day’s receipts, “take a good look at that money. It looks exactly the same. You can’t tell who put it into your box office. It’s the same color, the same size, and the same shape. Don’t forget that.”

Veeck didn’t forget. As a teenager he knocked around the stands, sanding down the seats to keep them smooth from splinters, and sold hot dogs in the bleachers. He listened to the tired men and women who endured the depression and came to watch the games after work—or in lieu of work, when no jobs could be found. Nothing pleased him more than listening to the strategies of the fans wasting their afternoons in the cheap seats. These people spent their time and money on the Cubs when money was scarce and those hours could

be used to raise a few dimes just to feed your family. He never forgot that, either.

The elder Veeck died when Bill Jr. was in college. After a few years working with the Cubs, from the ballpark to the front office, the son decided the time was right to run his own team. He rounded up a group of skeptical investors—all prominent friends of his father—who felt obliged to usher the son onto the path to his first failure. After one of his squirrely pitch sessions, with Veeck gesticulating wildly and unable to sit still even for a moment, they wondered aloud how this nut could be William Veeck's son. It was as if a banana had sprouted from the branch of an apple tree. But they figured that since this was a certain fiasco, Veeck would get his needed kick in the pants and get drummed right out of the sport. So Veeck bought the Milwaukee Brewers, a sorry minor league team that hadn't operated in the black since before the depression. He cleaned up rickety Borchert Field, made a variety of shrewd trades, and in the course of two seasons took that wormy franchise from last place to a pennant winner. More than a million fans turned up, a better attendance than any team in America with the exception of the Yankees and the Cardinals—and his was a minor league club. His investors nearly had coronaries from the news, but the money made them happy.

A few months after Pearl Harbor, Veeck, bored with three seasons of first-place finishes and sellout crowds, joined the Marines and sold his share of the Brewers. He was shipped to Guadalcanal, where the recoil from a 50mm gun shattered his ankle. Infection set in. He spent fourteen of his eighteen months of service in military hospitals. Finally they took his leg off and discharged him. When he hit the shore, hobbling on his new crutches, he didn't wait a day to start looking to buy a team on the cheap, which meant a last-place club with few prospects.

Veeck had, by his own admission, barely "five hundred clams" coming out of the war, and an Arizona ranch he could mortgage. The Philadelphia Athletics were suddenly available. Connie Mack, owner and manager of the A's, was planning on retiring and handing over the plow to his sons, Earl, Connie Jr., and Roy. But they began fighting, lawyers were called, and a disgusted Mack sold Veeck the Athletics against his sons' wishes. The boys howled and, just as suddenly, Mack regretted his decision. Veeck, desperate for a team, his financing on slippery footing, most of it coming in the form of loans from

dubious sources, agreed that if he failed to show a profit by year's end (it could be but a penny), the Mack family had the right to buy the team back. And would.

Sam worried about the conditions of the sale, worried about the difficulty of repairing Philadelphia's Shibe Park, about raising this sorry club from last place . . . until Veeck mentioned Negroes. That trumped everything. It even trumped the war.

When Sam asked Veeck how in the living daylights he was going to sign a Negro ballplayer against Judge Landis's wishes, not to mention against decades of tradition, Veeck didn't even hesitate. Get this, Veeck said: For a smokescreen, he had rounded up a bunch of Negro investors and bought the Philadelphia Stars, a Negro League club, and every black player signed would be a member of the Stars on paper. They would hold *two* spring training camps: one for the A's—the white players he was going to release (and where he had invited hundreds of press to help complete the deception)—and one in Cartwheel, Florida, for the real team, no press allowed. On April 1, a couple of weeks before the season opened, Veeck would hand over the contracts to Commissioner Landis for approval, flanked by dozens of sympathetic newspapermen. At the same time he would release all the white players (who were, to a man, lousy, since the best players were fighting in Europe and the Pacific) and emerge with, as he triumphantly bellowed to Sam, an unbeatable team. It seemed to Sam that he was the only one who knew how impossible this plan was. The press didn't want to be on Landis's bad side. And why couldn't the commissioner kick them out of baseball, even if the season was about to begin? Veeck just waved those concerns away, even though they also buzzed like hornets in his head every minute of every day.

In the meantime, for appearance's sake, Veeck would hold press conferences as if nothing had changed, would use printed letterhead with his name and the A's and their white elephant logo, another for the Stars, and would make a big deal out of the value of the Negro Leagues in the World War II market. From the very start he claimed he would run the A's as Connie Mack would have, business as usual. Initially he met with many of the other owners, arguing that they should consider buying Negro League teams, or at least host his club to help raise some badly needed funds for everyone. They believed him; the press believed him; the players and the public believed him.

So it was that Bill Veeck and Sam Dailey found themselves in the middle of Whoknowswhere, Texas, on a scorching day in late 1943. They were in search of a prize, and this time the prize was a man: Josh Gibson. Veeck ached to see Gibson's artillery in the majors—the homers rising out of Shibe Park, doubles and triples and just plain mashed baseballs. For the last two weeks Veeck had been regaling Sam with tales of Josh Gibson's fabulous exploits. Their scouts told him that Josh had just come off his finest season in 1943: 41 homers and a .449 batting average with the Negro League Homestead Grays, who had been playing in Washington, D.C., that year. One of the greatest catchers in any league. Why, Josh could throw out the fastest base runners, call the best pitches, hit for power and for average. Veeck couldn't stop shouting about the guy: Josh's arms were like railroad ties! Great eyes, sees better than Ted Williams! Should've been in the majors years ago . . . that's the beauty of the thing! We'll unleash this guy and all the rest just when they aren't expecting it!

But his ballplayers were proving hard to find. With the arrival of winter, Negro Leaguers followed the heat, moving from Philadelphia to New Orleans, down to Monterrey, Mexico, back up to Oklahoma and rural Texas—wherever they could play for decent, or not so decent, wages. Veeck hired Oscar Charleston, possibly the greatest baseball player, black or white, in history, and Fay Young, the *Chicago Defender's* great black sportswriter, to hunt down ballplayers. Both men had an eye for talent. There were only two players you didn't need a scout to tell you were the cream: the first was Satchel Paige, the other was Josh Gibson.

Sam read the press clippings from the Negro papers and was as baffled by their yellow journalism as Bill's utter faith in their reportage. When he wasn't sufficiently terrorized by the thought of Negroes invading baseball in general, Sam's baseball mind took over, and he wondered just how good men like Gibson really were. Like most white baseball men of the time, he tried to imagine what kind of pitching Gibson faced. You could find bushel basketsful of minor league hit-men who clobbered dozens of homers in a week against farm boys without any movement to their fastballs. Sam would admit that Gibson's legend was far-reaching—they'd been driving for days, following rumors from Birmingham to New Orleans and now the most lonely sections of Texas, burning through the combined gas-ration coupons of Veeck, Sam, and all their friends and families. But

rumors were only rumors. And to make matters worse, some weren't good: one coach in Baton Rouge had fired Josh for reasons he wouldn't go into, and in fact wouldn't even open the door to answer the question. Then there was the teammate in Oatmeal, Nebraska, who, over a dinner that consisted mostly of beer and whiskey, reported that Josh had also spent part of last year in a sanatorium, and was once found naked in an alley mumbling to himself, "Why won't you talk to me, DiMaggio?" A fellow ballplayer in Lubbock said he went crazy. In Mobile they'd even heard he was dead.

None of this bothered Veeck. He took a long pull on his cigarette and said, "Leo Rothberg's heading to Santo Domingo tomorrow to look for Satch. We'll have Fay in Newark and Pittsburgh to look for talent there. He's got some ideas. And Oscar's racing around the South. How about this for our press conference: *The greatest aggregate of talent in baseball history!*" From the corner of his eye he could see Sam's discomfort. He shook his head and chuckled. "Would you loosen your tie? And take off your jacket. You're making *me* feel sick."

Sam loosened his tie, which only made him appear more uncomfortable. Staring out the window at the few ramshackle homes they'd pass, he wondered how anyone could live in such utter desolation. They were going to find ballplayers here? When he met Oscar Charleston, the brute seemed inarticulate, maybe violent if provoked. Sam didn't trust instinct, but his was rankled. And it seemed strange all this hunting they had to do: you look for the white boys on the sandlots, in the minors, sometimes even in colleges. These Negroes were scattered about like gypsies, their talent nothing more than whispered legend. Sam didn't truly believe that Fay Young or Oscar Charleston, Negroes both, would be fair judges. He was tired of the chase and tired of hearing about Josh Gibson. He could only blame himself for being in this predicament: he hated to rock the boat, yet always jumped in the dinghy with the crackpot at the oars. "Bill," he said at last, noticing now that there weren't even shacks to break up the sunburned fields, "what if we took just *one*? Just Satchel. I mean, a whole team of Negroes, for God's sake! While you're at it, why not a whole team of Jews?"

Veeck took a swig of beer, and then said, "Which white players are worth keeping, Sam?" Sam scowled and folded his arms. Veeck chuckled. "Sam, I'm not looking to sign Negroes. I'm looking to sign

the best. The best happen to all be Negroes. It's the same old troubles, Sam: had we not fielded a winner in Milwaukee, we'd have lost the team for lack of profit. That goes double for the A's. We're so deep in the red we might as well be on Mars. Don't forget: promotions only go so far. Field the best players and you make money. Lots of money. So what if they're white, Negro, Jewish, Arab, or Eskimo? And these men can play, Sam. They'll give us the pennant and keep us in the black. In a big way."

"We're black in a big way, all right," Sam huffed. "Josh Gibson. Drunk. Insane. Dead, maybe. What a prize."

"You take the churchgoers, I'll go with the lushes. That would leave me with Babe Ruth, Rogers Hornsby, Grover Cleveland Alexander. That would leave you with the . . . Lutheran Softball League." Veeck laughed and lit another cigarette off the one he was smoking. "Sam, these players, they're going to have their plaques in the Hall of Fame, nearly every one . . . and we'll get them for peanuts." The car hit another pothole, almost sending Sam into the dashboard. Veeck ignored Sam's groan, and continued: "It's like war: you sit in a trench with a Jew, an Italian, a Negro, and pretty soon you realize that, hey, this guy can do the job just like anyone else. That's what people'll say when they see the A's. When we're ten games up at the All-Star break, no one's going to notice the color of their skin. And the turnstiles will be spinning."

"You forget: the army doesn't put Negroes in the trenches. I wasn't even there and I know that."

"Okay, so they don't," Veeck said, tired of talk of the war. "But we will." He nodded ahead. "Keep an eye out for the park. It has to be here somewhere."

Sam wished Veeck would listen to reason. He stared out the window at land that couldn't be used for grazing, building, anything at all but maybe roasting German prisoners of war.

Sam Dailey was a serious man. Truth was, you wouldn't find anyone who'd emphasize that point more than Sam himself. His was a family of lawyers and doctors and a bunch of opinionated businessmen whom Sam secretly loathed but respected with all his heart because they were family and made a great deal of money. From a young age he had been groomed for professional success. At Cornell Sam threw himself into the study of law, hoping to impress his fam-

ily and the world around him. He graduated in '38 and moved to Milwaukee to endure the profession he felt was his destiny.

But Sam harbored secret dreams that nagged him nearly every night, dating to his youth. When he was seven his father took him to a White Sox game, and he was hooked from the first pitch. Ever since then, Sam had dreamed of becoming a ballplayer. Like most people, he didn't have nearly enough talent to make this happen, even in high school. Unlike most people, watching the game only made him want to be a part of the sport, to breathe it as ballplayers did. As he grew older, Sam threw himself into his work, hoping the demands of study and then business would help him suppress these desires. They did—but only during the day. At night, visions of a baseball life surged beneath his consciousness, pulling at his plans like an undertow.

His fortunes changed one March afternoon before the war, in Milwaukee. Sam was pining away, staring out the window of his office in the direction of Chicago. He wished it were April and that he was in Comiskey Park drinking beer next to a woman. Instead he was stuck in his office, gazing at the dull, battleship-grey skies. Lake Michigan was flat and without character. The air was damp, the snow was dingy and crusted to the ground. These are the miserable days when the promise of baseball is as profound—and, in Milwaukee, unrequited—as the promise of love. His secretary buzzed him and he jumped with surprise. "What?" he yelled. Bill Veeck was in the waiting room. "Who?" Some promoter. Works for the Brewers. Against his better judgment, Sam told her to send him in.

Veeck never entered a room when he could storm in, and knowing that Sam Dailey, Esq., wasn't expecting him, he smacked the doors open and burst through in one swift move. Veeck never sat, and Sam didn't have the opportunity to offer him a seat. But it was, Sam recalled, as if the sun were suddenly bright in that office. This nut was going to revitalize the Brewers, and he was hunting for investors and a permanent lawyer for the team. Would Sam invest, and how about being their lawyer? Sam was intrigued. He was one of the few who actually paid any attention to the hardscrabble Brewers, showing up at nearly every game, most of which were blowouts that rarely favored the home team. Veeck didn't know this, nor did he mention that Sam was his third choice, after he had been unceremoniously tossed out of two other law firms. As Veeck explained it, a

little paint on the park, a few shrewd deals, and the Brewers—they of the rickety wooden stadium and last-place finishes for the past dozen years (not to mention being on the verge of bankruptcy and never having made a profit)—would rise up from the ashes like the phoenix with its tail on fire. Of course, Sam would have to work pro bono at first, but think of the possibilities! Being a kindhearted soul and enjoying this performance enormously, Sam gave this huckster fifteen minutes of his time. At first Sam listened with amusement. This guy was crazy, anyone could see that. He wants me not only to work for free but to throw away money besides? On the Brewers? It was too incredible. But as Veeck spoke, Sam felt his shoulders relax and his head grow light. His whole body tingled as if under the influence of morphine. Alarmed at this reaction, Sam ended the conversation and promised to purchase a pair of season tickets. He pushed Veeck out, then leaned against the closed door, out of breath. Baseball would be good for Milwaukee, Sam reasoned, and went back to work.

He didn't sleep that night. The next day, baggy-eyed and weary, he doubled his labors, trying to shake Bill Veeck and that ridiculous ballclub from his mind. Every fifteen minutes he'd take out his bank book and examine the figures. He liked those numbers. If he ever got married it'd be a good start, put his kid through college someday. Tapping the corner of the book on his desk, he looked around the office. It seemed cramped, the windows dirty, the view tedious. His clients paid well, but could he have found a more unimaginative group? Wills without controversy, business arrangements between such honest men that a handshake would have sufficed. Maybe he should study a different type of law, something with more spark, more verve. Satisfied with this compromise, he took half a day off. On his way home he drove by the ballpark. Every day that week Sam took long walks over lunch and lost his appetite.

Sam Dailey invested every dime he had in the Milwaukee Brewers and became their sole legal representative. He shifted his clients to his partner, mortgaged his home, and then proceeded to curse himself for this sudden recklessness. And still he couldn't sleep. But come the dawn, he raced to the ballpark, happy again. Every day was a growing joy.

When Bill quit the game and joined the Marines, Sam's heart just about broke. Without Veeck, it wouldn't be the same . . . too much