

August 7, 1921 · *Steven Hayward*

NOW: the New York Yankees are the greatest team in baseball history. They have won twice as many World Series Championships as any other team, and the greatest player in the history of the game, Babe Ruth, wore a Yankee uniform for most of his career.

But the mighty Yankees have not *always* been a great team. In the early part of this century, they were never more than an occasional contender, and as late as 1920 they were still in search of their first pennant.

Whenever a baseball team is not winning, its owners begin to worry about attendance, and it was this worry that led to the creation of what Merle Huggins (Yankee Manager from 1918-1929) called “Give-Away Days.” The first Give-Away Day was on June 3, 1918 (when 6,500 Yankee caps were given away), and the last was on September 17, 1927 (when over 80,000 pretzels shaped like Yankee logos were distributed).

After ten years of Give-Away Days, the Yankees had managed to dole out a greater variety of baseball paraphernalia than any other team in the history of baseball. There had been Cap Day, Bottle Opener Day, Pennant Day, Cigar Day, Pillow Day, Sock Day, Mug Day, Pretzel Day, Jersey Day, Sneaker Day, Baseball Card Day, Camera Day, Hot Dog Day, Tobacco Day, Chewing Tobacco Day, Cracker Jack Day, and Peanut Day, to name a few.

August 7, 1921 was Bat Day.

According to *The Completely Complete Book of Baseball Statistics* by Dr. Venus Guzman, there were 21,106 paying customers in Yankee Stadium that day, and 15,000 of them had been given complimentary baseball bats as they entered the stadium. This story is concerned with seven of those people. The first two are Mary and Lyman Labrow.

I know about the Labrows thanks to an article published on September 21, 1923 (roughly two years after Bat Day) that I found in the archives of a now-defunct newspaper called the *New York Reflector*. The article described the circumstances that led to *both* of the Labrows being in Yankee Stadium that day and was accompanied by a photo of the couple. The photo was taken on their honeymoon. In it, Mary and Lyman are out-of-focus, smiling and wearing clothes which were already unfashionable in 1921. The Grand Canyon is visible in the background. Lyman Labrow was an

optometrist and Mary Labrow was a seamstress. They lived in Bergen County, New Jersey, and had no children.

On August 7, 1921, Mary Labrow was sitting one row ahead of me in Yankee Stadium. She was a small, birdlike woman and, that day, she was wearing a nondescript brown dress. Mary Labrow did not look at the field once during the game. Instead, she was looking at two people sitting three rows ahead of her, at a man and a woman.

The man she was looking at was her husband, Lyman Labrow. Mary had come to the game specifically to spy on him, and she could see him perfectly from where she was sitting. Lyman, however, did not see *her* until it was too late; until *after* she had noticed the same thing I had noticed during the first inning, when Lyman had first sat down in his seat: that he was not alone.

Lyman Labrow had come to the game that day with his secretary, a twenty-three-year-old woman named Jackie Hubbs. She was wearing a bright yellow dress and carried a small white purse that had a medium-sized bulge in it. She was exactly the kind of girl you look at during baseball games when there is no one at bat.

For the first three innings, no one could have guessed that Lyman Labrow and Jackie Hubbs were romantically involved, despite the fact they were sitting next to one another. They watched the game and their hands did not even touch. Jackie Hubbs's white purse sat chastely on her lap and her white fingers were folded chastely on top of it. However, it became evident during the fourth inning, when Jackie Hubbs reached into her purse and removed the medium-sized bulge, that she and Lyman Labrow were having an affair.

I suppose that today she and Lyman Labrow could have complicated sexual intercourse in the stands behind third base, and no one would think, or say, anything. But those were different times. On August 7, 1921, Jackie Hubbs caused a sensation in Yankee Stadium by eating a medium-sized Granny Smith apple.

She began by shining the apple, by rubbing it extensively and energetically against her bright yellow dress. But instead of biting into it, she licked it three times, extraordinarily slowly, and handed it to Lyman Labrow. He looked at the apple, took a bite, and gave it back to her. Jackie Hubbs stroked the white part of the apple with her finger and then touched Lyman Labrow's lips, softly.

And Mary Labrow sat perfectly still, three rows behind them, watching. Those are the first three people who matter in this story.

The fourth person who matters in this story is a drunken off-duty policeman from Evansville, Indiana, named John Seidl, and the fifth person who matters in this story is a sober Yiddish typewriter salesman from New York City named Norman Flax. John Seidl was sitting in the seat to my right and Norman Flax was sitting directly in front of me.

I know that Norman Flax was a Yiddish typewriter salesman from New York City because he stood up in the bottom of the second inning and introduced himself to a rabbi who was sitting behind me. Norman's mother was sitting beside him, and it was she who pointed out the rabbi to her son. Clearly Norman Flax was the sort of salesman who was always on the lookout for rabbis.

"I'm Norman Flax," he said, reaching over my head to shake the rabbi's hand. "If you need a Yiddish typewriter, you know who to call."

"I've already got a typewriter," said the rabbi. "What should I need another one for?"

"Maybe you don't need one now," said Norman Flax. "But you never know. When you *do* need one, call this number and ask for Flax."

And I know that John Seidl was a drunken off-duty policeman from Evansville, Indiana, because he spent most of the game talking loudly to another drunken off-duty policeman from Evansville, Indiana, whose name I never found out.

"I gotta take a leak," announced John Seidl in the bottom of the fourth inning (just as Jackie Hubbs was reaching for the medium-sized bulge in her purse). "And when John Seidl has to take a leak, John Seidl has to take a leak."

John Seidl was the sort of man who habitually refers to himself in the third person, and that is why I happen to know his name.

"Whattya want me to do?" asked the other off-duty policeman from Evansville, Indiana.

"Ahh," replied John Seidl, as he was standing up. "You're hilarious."

Now: John Seidl was a big man, and when he stood up to make his way out into the aisle, he steadied himself by putting his hand on the shoulder of the person sitting next to him, and almost fell down. It was not a shoulder that provided much support, because it was the shoulder of a ten-year-old

boy. It was my shoulder. That was me. I was sitting beside the sixth person who matters in this story.

Unlike the majority of people in the stands behind third base that day, the sixth person who matters in this story was concentrating on the game. His real name was Giovanni Spadafina, but everyone—even my mother—called him Samson Spadafina. He was my father.

My father worked at the Heinzman Piano Factory where he was one of twenty-three men responsible for the manufacture of the tiny hammers that strike the strings inside Heinzman pianos. He had come to New York from Italy in 1911 with my mother.

“The name of the ship,” he used to tell me, “was the Santa Maria.”

This was something that he said repeatedly. Like Christopher Columbus, my father was from Genoa, and the fact that he landed at Ellis Island in a ship called the Santa Maria was of great symbolic importance to him. It allowed him to claim, only half-ironically, that he had arrived in the New World in the same vessel as Columbus. I am aware this is an extremely dubious, if not dangerous, claim to make in this age of political correctness, but it is one that my father—were he still alive today—would continue to make. To my father, Columbus represented everything a man should be: he was intelligent, resourceful, brave, industrious, physically strong, self-sufficient, and very, very rich.

“The Italians,” my father used to say, “civilized the world.”

When he was not working at the Heinzman Piano Factory he supplemented his income by gambling, and won almost every bet he ever placed. This was not because my father was particularly lucky, but because he always bet on the same thing: himself. He had developed a routine that would usually result in someone agreeing to bet against him. First, he would walk into a bar and order a drink. Then he would begin to talk. He always said the same thing.

“In the Old Country,” he would say, “everyone was afraid of me.”

Then he would tell the story of his impossible strength, about the earthquake that shook Italy in the spring of 1887, and how the roof of his parents’ house landed on his father’s legs. He was only a child then, and said he didn’t give much thought to what he’d done until *after* he’d done it. He just lifted the roof off his father.

“And that,” he would say, “was when they started calling me Samson.”

The routine usually worked. After he finished telling the story of his

impossible strength, the other men in the bar would begin to look at him, to size him up.

The truth is that my father was not a physically imposing man. He was less than five feet tall and did not *look* strong. There was almost always someone willing to wager he wasn't strong *at all*.

There were a number of stunts he could perform to demonstrate his impossible strength, and these stunts were usually the subject of the bets he would place. He could pick up tables with his teeth, perform one-arm chin-ups with another man clinging to his back, arm wrestle three people at once, rip telephone books in half, and on one occasion I saw him juggle a rusted cannonball, a butcher's knife, and a small dog named Omar.

But my father had to be careful never to go into the same bar too many times, otherwise people would challenge him to do something that was *really* impossible. This was what almost happened when he won the tickets to the Yankees game.

I was with him that day. My mother had sent us down to East 88th Street, to the Columbus Bakery, to buy a loaf of bread. On the way he stopped into a bar called O'Malley's and ordered a drink. Then he began to talk.

"In the Old Country," he said, "everybody was afraid of me. . . ."

I suppose that if he had been paying closer attention, he would have seen the look on the bartender's face, how he whispered to another man behind the bar, and the way they both laughed. My father would have known it was a set-up.

"All right, Samson," said the bartender, "I've got a pair of Yankee tickets right here that say you can't lift the man sitting at the back of the bar."

"That's all?" he asked.

"That's all," said the bartender. "You just lift him up, and you walk out of here with the tickets; if not, then you pay me for the tickets and I keep them."

"*Adesso*," said my father, waving both his hands. In Genoese dialect this is an expression that can mean almost anything. It can be a confirmation, a contradiction, a compliment, a protest, a warning, a congratulation, a shout of dismay, or a way of asking someone to pass the pasta. In that particular context, it was the Genoese equivalent of my father announcing that he was ready to demonstrate his impossible strength.

Everyone followed the bartender to the back of the bar.

It was impossible *not* to recognize the man my father was required to lift. He was perhaps the most easily identifiable person in the whole of New York. He had been interviewed by every major newspaper, been photographed by the *Guinness Book of World Records*, and had shaken Charlie Chaplin's hand. People came from all over the world to catch a glimpse of him, or to have their photograph taken while sitting on his lap. However, many people declined such a photo opportunity because the man charged a nickel (which in those days was a lot of money) for the privilege. He had a concession at the foot of the Statue of Liberty and it was rumored that he made a pretty fair living. His real name was Brian Flanagan, but everyone called him what the papers called him: The Fattest Man in New York City.

He was sitting at the back of the bar in a reinforced steel chair which had been specially constructed to bear his weight. He looked like he had been born in that chair.

When my father saw The Fattest Man in New York City he looked worried. He wiped his hands on his pants. This meant that his palms were sweating. I knew this was a bad sign. My father had palms that never sweated.

"I've made a bet," he whispered to me. "I have to try."

"Good luck," said the bartender, as my father moved closer to The Fattest Man in New York City. "You'll need it."

The bar became completely silent. All I could hear was the sound of my father breathing and The Fattest Man in New York City's uneven wheeze.

"No one has ever lifted me," said The Fattest Man in New York City.

"Perhaps I will be the first," replied my father, moving closer to him.

Now: I knew exactly what my father was thinking. He was thinking about Columbus, about being first. I remember watching my father as he paced circles around The Fattest Man in New York City and—for the first time in my life—I *worried* about him.

I'm not sure exactly how it happened.

"*Adesso*," called out my father, and in a split second, with one perfectly fluid clean-and-jerk movement, it was over. He had somehow taken hold of a foot and a shoulder and lifted the huge man over his head. The Fattest Man in New York City looked worriedly at the floor, and vomited.

My father quickly put him down, picked up the Yankee tickets, and walked out of the bar wiping off one of his coat sleeves. "Don't tell your

mother about this,” he said when we were out on the street, “and I’ll take you to the game tomorrow.”

They were good seats, but they weren’t great seats. My father didn’t seem to mind. That was before television, and he had never seen a baseball game before. He had no idea what was going on.

“I understand the strikes,” he said to me, “but what’s a ball?”

I was about to explain the difference when Babe Ruth came up to bat.

Babe Ruth is the seventh person who matters in this story.

Now: in the bottom of the ninth inning only the core of Jackie Hubbs’s Granny Smith apple remained. She held it between her lips and made a loud sucking noise that drew the attention of everyone sitting in the stands behind third base. I think even Lyman Labrow was embarrassed, although he didn’t look like he was about to complain. It was then that Mary Labrow found that she could not contain herself any longer. She stood up and spoke to her husband.

This is what she said: “Lyman, you snake, I’m going to kill you.”

Unlike myself, John Seidl and the other drunken off-duty policeman from Evansville, Indiana, paid no attention to the domestic dispute occurring two rows ahead of them. They were deep in conversation. They had already discussed criminals, the criminal mind, specific criminals John Seidl had arrested, the difference between criminals in New York City and criminals in Evansville, the trouble with John Seidl’s kids, the trouble with all kids, the trouble with John Seidl’s wife, the trouble with having a wife at all, and then, finally, in the bottom of the seventh inning, they began to discuss the 1919 World Series, and who was responsible for fixing it.

“It’s them Jews that done it,” said John Seidl loudly.

“I don’t know,” said the other drunken off-duty policeman from Evansville, Indiana.

“John Seidl is here to tell ya,” said John Seidl. “It’s them Jews.”

“Ain’t none of the players that were Jews,” pointed out the other man.

Norman Flax turned around in his seat to see who was speaking, and then went back to watching the game.

John Seidl saw him turn around and kept talking.

“It don’t matter that none of them was Jews,” he said, and sounded so ugly that even Norman Flax’s mother turned to look at him. “It was them Jews—they’re the ones with the money.”

That was when Norman Flax stood up.

“Which Jews exactly?” asked Norman Flax. “Just tell me which of them Jews it was, so that I can get them.”

“Siddown boy,” said John Seidl. “You don’t want no trouble from John Seidl.”

“I’ll sit down,” said Norman Flax. “When you shut up.”

That was when John Seidl stood up.

Babe Ruth stepped into the batter’s box. The pitcher threw the first pitch, and the umpire called a strike.

“That’s a strike?” asked my father. “How can it be a strike if he doesn’t swing?”

Babe Ruth stepped out of the batter’s box, hit his cleats with his bat, and stepped back in. The second pitch was thrown. This time he took a swing and hit a high foul ball into the stands behind third base, right where we were sitting.

If it had been any other day at Yankee Stadium nothing would have happened. It would have been a foul ball and the game would have continued.

But it was August 7, 1921.

Bat Day.

Everyone swung at exactly the same time.

Mary Labrow reached across two rows of seats and attempted to hit Lyman Labrow with her complimentary bat. Lyman saw the complimentary bat coming at him and ducked out of the way. In fact, everyone sitting in that row ducked out of the way, with the conspicuous exception of Jackie Hubbs, who, with both of her eyes closed, was preoccupied with sucking an apple core.

The complimentary bat hit her in the face and flattened her nose completely. There was a strangely silent moment just before Jackie Hubbs began to scream, when she reached up to her nose, and found it missing.

And Norman Flax reached for his complimentary bat and took a swing at John Seidl.

And John Seidl reached for his complimentary bat and took a swing at Norman Flax.

And both men were knocked instantaneously unconscious. They fell forward and rolled out into the aisle, in each other’s arms.

And my father moved with the same unreal fluidity with which he had lifted The Fattest Man in New York City over his head. The foul ball

headed right toward us, and before I knew what was happening, he had reached for his complimentary bat and jumped onto his seat.

“*Adesso*,” he told me and bent his knees slightly, and took a swing at the foul ball, and hit it right back at Babe Ruth.

The last thing I remember seeing as we walked quickly out of Yankee Stadium was Babe Ruth lying over home plate. No one knew what had happened. One moment Babe Ruth was hitting his cleats with his bat, and the next, he had collapsed into the dust.

We walked straight home and my father did not say a word. It was not until we got to our house, until he had opened the front door, that he noticed the bat was still in his hands.

“Carmella,” he told my mother, “I think I killed Babe Ruth.”

What happened next happened very quickly.

My mother decided that we had to do something. So we neither waited for the papers the next day (which said that Babe Ruth was still alive), nor went to the police station (which was already filling with the casualties of Bat Day). Instead: we panicked. We packed our things and got on a train the next morning. We came to Canada.

After that, my father stopped doing impossible things. He became a quiet, ordinary carpenter who earned a living building porches and installing kitchen cabinets. People no longer called him Samson and he never told anyone about August 7, 1921. He died when he was sixty-two years old, of prostate cancer. They sent him home after the treatment had failed. His hair had fallen out and he was completely blind.

The last picture of him was taken just before he died, at my daughter’s fifth birthday party. He had already been sent home by the hospital.

In the picture he is singing “Happy Birthday,” but looking the wrong way as my daughter blows out the candles on her cake. On the table in front of him there are some walnuts that he has cracked open. The nuts are still in them. My father never liked eating walnuts, but loved cracking them open. He would pick up a nut and squeeze it until the shell cracked. He was the only one I ever knew who could do that with only one hand. I’ve tried it more times than I can count. I suppose that this is the picture that would have to go at the end of his story. Or maybe just a close-up of the walnuts.

August 7, 1921 was the first and last Bat Day in the history of baseball. One-hundred-eighty-seven people, including Babe Ruth, were injured that day. According to the article in the *New York Reflector*, the Labrows

divorced and Jackie Hubbs had reconstructive surgery on her face. In the paper she was quoted as saying that she liked her new nose “better.” I have no idea what happened to John Seidl and Norman Flax. The last time I saw them, they were lying with their eyes closed, in each other’s arms at the end of our aisle. We stepped over them as we exited the stadium. Perhaps they lived happily ever after.

I still have the complimentary bat that my father got that day. Today it is a rotted piece of wood, and the Yankee logo on its side has faded during the years it was kept in the damp basement of my house. The truth is that if I could show it to you, you would be unimpressed. It does not look at all like a bat that might have changed the course of history.

But I still have it. I am an old man now, with grandchildren of my own, but there are days when I go into the basement just to touch it. The feel of the wood never fails to bring back that day, the day my father became afraid. I close my eyes and I can see myself standing beside him in Yankee Stadium. The game is about to begin and both of us are singing “The Star-Spangled Banner.” His real name was Giovanni, but everyone—even my mother—called him Samson. I smell the grass and hear the roar of the crowd, the final note dissolving into sunshine.