Bleachers in the Bedroom: the Swampoodle Irish and Connie Mack

By John J. Rooney

I would like to thank many people for their assistance and understanding during the time I was working on this book. My late wife Marion, my late daughter Mary T. Lynch and her husband Vince, my daughter Marian and her long-time companion Keith Heinly and my son John were all sources of inspiration to me. I want to acknowledge my late brother Gerry, his widow Julie and the many friends who lived in the old Swampoodle neighborhood, particularly Joe Loughlin, Bill Murray. Frank Renye, Joe Roddy, Phil Santo. Pat Salvatore and Jim Slavin. So many colleagues at La Salle University have been helpful and supportive, especially Elaine Elezko, John Keenan, Mary McGlynn, Jack Seydow, Donna Tonrey and my regular lunchtime friends Jon Caroulis, Jack Reardon and Jack Rossi.

I hope readers who had relatives living in some of the old ethnic urban neighborhoods in the past (including my own grandchildren and families of nieces and nephews) will find something of value in a visit to that time and place.

Published by

The Educational Publisher

www.EduPublisher.com

ISBN: 978-1-62249-006-6

Contents

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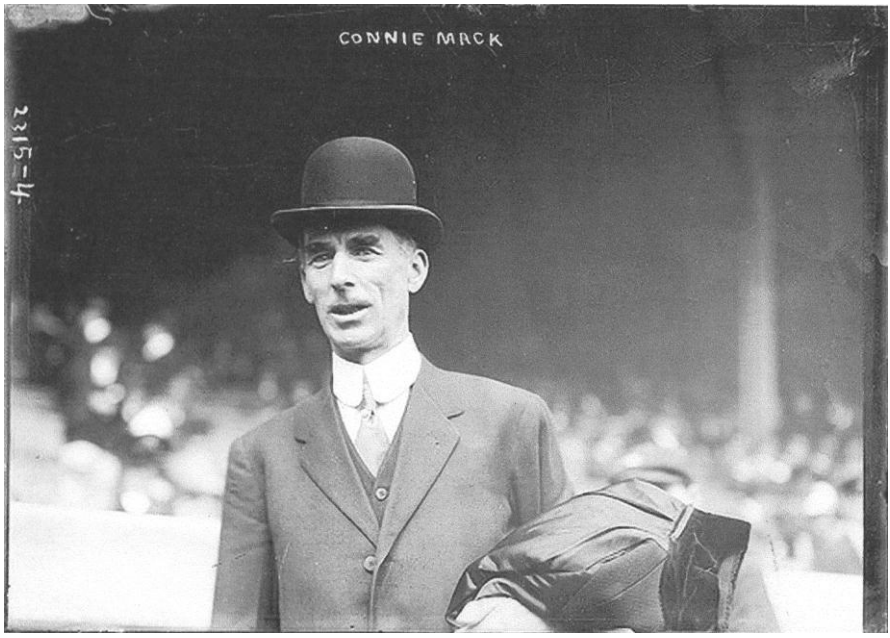

Preface

"We write to taste life twice, once in the moment and once in retrospect".

Anaisa Nin

Some people say you are born lucky; others say you create your own luck. Me, I was born lucky. I might have grown up in some poverty-stricken country where people don't have enough to eat or in someplace where they spend their lives riding around the desert on a camel. And even lots of Americans spent their early years in some backwater town or on an isolated farm with nothing to do except watch the grass grow. In Swampoodle we always had

something doing: games in the streets of stick ball, pimple ball, half ball, hose ball, handball, wall ball, awning ball, wire ball and anything else we could come up with; football and softball games in "The Square" and sometimes organized and supervised games of baseball in nearby Funfield Recreation Center. Of course, kids who grew up in other urban neighborhoods in those days had similar amenities, but we had something special: our house sat directly across the street from Shibe Park, home of Connie Mack's Philadelphia A's and site of all kinds of electrifying events.

Connie Mack is a revered figure in baseball lore today. At the time, though, Philadelphia fans criticized him unremittingly. Mostly they said he was a cheapskate, a charge they supported with Mack's own words: "It is more profitable for me to have a team that is in contention for most of the season but finishes about fourth. A team like that will draw well enough…to show a profit …and you don't have to give the players raises…"

Some people thought Mack, who always wore a suit and tie and comported himself like a gentleman, was a desirable role model for the Irish to emulate; many Irish demurred. "Why would he change his name from a good Irish name like Cornelius McGillicutty" our neighbor, Mrs. Sweeney protested. "He should be proud of a name like that."

Those of us who lived on 20th Street feuded constantly with Mack and the rest of the team's management. They were irate that we charged fans to view the game from our rooftops and front bedrooms, and they constantly tried to stop this practice. "These houses were here before the ballpark was built" Dad countered, "and we have a right to invite anyone into our house we want."

Connie also had many admirers. His friend Red Smith emphasized his complexity, characterizing him as "tough and warm

and wonderful, kind and stubborn and courtly and unreasonable and generous and calculating and naive and gentle and proud and humorous and demanding and unpredictable." Albert Barnes, head of the Barnes Foundation and Art Gallery, when asked, "who was the greatest artist of all time, didn't hesitate. "Connie Mack!" he replied, in recognition of some of the past masterpieces he had created. In 1928, though, Mack's championship seasons were in the distant past. He was now over 65, too old, in the minds of many fans, for the modern game. The New York Yankees, with Babe Ruth and Lou Gehrig, had created a new dynasty that threatened to dominate baseball for years to come. Yet, Connie was building a contender once again, and some Philly fans were beginning to think the old boy might yet bring us another championship.

The ballpark across the street afforded one center of activity in the neighborhood; St. Columba's Church, its gray stone Gothic structures extending from 23rd to 24th on Lehigh Avenue, provided another. One of the largest and most vibrant parishes in the city, with seven priests and a couple of dozen Sisters of St. Joseph, it sponsored carnivals, block parties, Bingo and card games, stage shows and carefully selected movies. It featured a boys' choir and a Boy Scout troop. Something appealing was always going on.

Movie houses had sprung up throughout the neighborhood, all of them packed with kids on Saturday afternoons soaking up the adventures of our Tinsel town heroes. Radio programs featuring intriguing adventure shows had us sprawled on our living room rugs, while our minds soared to faraway places.

Dad was right at home in the neighborhood. He had grown up nearby, where his parents still lived; moreover, many of his old friends were still in the area. A former semi-pro ball player, he loved being right by the action in Shibe Park; and the income from

baseball enthusiasts watching the game from our roof, was icing on the cake. Mom, on the other hand, was not thrilled with Swampoodle- too crowded, too noisy, too dirty, too much hooliganism, too much drink and (though she was careful about saying it) too Irish.

My parents were often skeptical of my depiction of the things I encountered in school or on the streets and alleys of Swampoodle that I came out with at the supper table. Mom would give me that look and say "Jackie, I think you're a little story teller." When I looked her in the eye and insisted "no that really happened", she relented a bit. "Well, maybe it happened in your dreams."

The incidents in the following vignettes are authentic, at least as I remember them. My earliest memories, naturally enough, are about baseball.

Chapter 1. The Ladder to the Bathroom Skylight

"*Summer Afternoon…the Two Loveliest Words in the English Language*"

Henry James

I don't know what to expect when my father guides me upstairs to the bathroom where a long ladder leading up to the roof extends through the skylight in the ceiling. I wonder if my mother knows we are doing this as he starts me climbing, following close behind and supporting me as I move my hands and feet from rung to rung. At the top, he boosts me onto the roof and scrambles up

beside me. Several men, and a few women, are standing or sitting in assorted chairs: folding wooden chairs, canvas beach chairs straight-back kitchen chairs. Most are wearing hats as protection from the blazing summer sun. Black umbrellas and colorful parasols pop up here and there.

"There, Kiddo" Dad points down at the baseball diamond across the street, "for the rest of your life you can say you saw Ty Cobb, Tris Speaker, and Al Simmons, three of the greatest stars of all time, playing in the same outfield." I gaze at the ballplayers spread out across the field in a variety of stances with their loose fitting uniforms gleaming white against the green grass of the field and am not particularly impressed. The sights and sounds of the spectators in the stands across the street are a part of my daily life, even though my rooftop perch offers a different perspective than the view from our front bedroom. I am getting restless and ready to go back down into the house.

The year is 1928. The A's are battling the New York Yankees for the American League championship, Al Smith is challenging the belief that a Catholic could never become President and my mother is considering defying tradition in our parish and enrolling me in public school for kindergarten.

Shibe Park, situated between 20th and 21st Streets and between Lehigh Avenue and Somerset Street, dominates the neighborhood. Built in 1909, the nation's first concrete and steel ballpark, it houses everything from political speeches to championship fights. Most of all, it is home to Connie Mack's Bull Elephants, the Athletics, more simply "the A's."

The neighborhood goes by various names: Catholics usually say they are from Saint Columba's, the name of the local parish; business people prefer the term North Penn (the local newspaper is

The North Penn Chat); mostly we call it Swampoodle. It is a row house, working class neighborhood, in many ways similar to other Philadelphia neighborhoods, such as Brewerytown, Fishtown or Hollywood-Under-the- Gas-Tank. None of these places, however, has a major league ballpark. Well over half of the residents and most of the kids are Irish or Irish-American. Many are second or third generation Irish, but quite a few have "just come off the boat." They have exchanged life on a small potato farm, where the nearest neighbor was a couple of miles away, for one with amenities like electricity, indoor bathroom and running water, where the row houses are close enough to one another that they could reach out the window and shake hands with (or take a swing at) their neighbor.

Ours is a neat two-story house with three bedrooms, a bathroom and a full basement. We have a front porch, living room, dining room, breakfast room (where we eat all of our meals) and a small kitchen (some people call it a shed) where Mom does the cooking and a back yard adjoining the alley.

The Protestants in the neighborhood, mostly English, German, Scotch-Irish or Scotch, are generally better off than the Irish-Catholics. Many own small businesses, or work as supervisors, managers and technicians in the factories. Most of them live in nicer homes on some of the larger streets. Catholics generally view them as gloomy, sober-sided people who don't know how to have some fun in their lives. A friend of my father commented on a more serious- minded one: "Ah, he acts like a Presbyterian Preacher."

The only Jews in the neighborhood are local storeowners. Some of them live above the stores, but most have homes in one of the city's Jewish neighborhoods such as nearby Strawberry Mansion, adjoining Fairmount Park, a mile or so away.

A small but populous Italian neighborhood is nearby,

extending west a few blocks from 22nd Street between Cambria and Venango. The Italians and Italian-Americans are a couple of rungs below the Irish on the social ladder, at least in the opinion of the Irish. Exotic cheeses hang in the windows of their stores, and live chickens hop around their butcher shop. They are not welcome in our area. A number of German and English families, and even a couple of Polish ones, live in the one-square block that is my childhood territory, but no Italians.

To the south is a large area occupied by "the Colored." At the bottom of the social scale, they make up about 12 per cent of the city's population. They are largely limited to menial jobs, and spend most of their time in their own neighborhood. Only a few venture into center city Philadelphia to join the predominantly white shopping crowds.

The disparate ethnic groups share a common source of entertainment and an opportunity for jobs in Shibe Park, where the A's are now giving Philadelphia fans something to get excited about. Last year, the Yankees, with Babe Ruth hitting a record-breaking 60 home runs and Lou Gehrig driving in 175 runs, had easily won the pennant and swept their second straight World Series by four games to none. Baseball experts are calling them the best team in the history of the game. Now though, after many seasons of languishing in the second division, Connie Mack's A's, are in a wild battle with them for the pennant. Philadelphia sports writers are comparing Al Simmons and Jimmy Foxx to Ruth and Gehrig. When I ask Dad about that, he says that they're pretty close; but that pitching is what could give the A's the edge. Grandpop pooh-poohs the sluggers on both American League teams. A Phillies' diehard, he swears that Chuck Klein and Lefty O'Doul are head and shoulders above either pair. Dad doesn't mind that too much, but

when Pop sits watching the A's game in our house with the paying customers, and he and his friend Mr. Rogers go on about the last-place Phillies being a more exciting team to watch than the A's, that really gets Dad's goat.

All ball games are played in the afternoon. As time for the first pitch approaches, crowds of fans spill out of the #54 trolley cars that clang along Lehigh Avenue; others parade the six blocks from Broad Street, where the railroads and the subway have stops; quite a few come by taxi. Not many parking spots are available. For a Saturday double-header with the Yankees (there is no Sunday baseball), cars ride up and down the streets hunting for parking. Some juvenile entrepreneur might jump on the running board, stick his head in the window, and convince the driver that he can find a space for him and earn a tip. Since I am not old enough to jump on running boards, I have an easier way. I simply sit on my front step well before game time and wait for a car to park in my territory. I lay claim to the spaces in front of our house, Busch's (our next-door neighbor up the street) and Hall's and Tammany's (the two nearest neighbors down the street). Dutchie has two spots up the street from mine. Other kids have their own spaces carefully monitored. The routine is the same: wave the driver into the parking space, and then ask, "Want me to mind your car, Mister?" loud and clear. Usually I get a nickel or dime after the game, when I walk up to the driver and say, "I watched your car, Mister." Of course, I watched it only when I happened to be there. When I see the line of yellow taxicabs winding around to 20th Street, I know the game is nearly over, and I scurry back to my post to collect.

Moonie sometimes flattens a car's tire, and then volunteers to pump it back up for a tip. He's a beefy kid with a square jaw, broad nose and prominent forehead who likes to wear shirts that show off

his muscles, and usually goes around barefoot in the summer. His clothes, mostly hand-me-downs from his older brothers, have obvious stains and tears. He can work that pump up and down though and fill a tire before the befuddled owner of the car has time to realize that he is the most likely kid to have flattened it in the first place. Geggie gets mad when Moonie tries to boss us around and says we should gang up on him and teach him a lesson. Moonie can be annoying with those shifty eyes and odd laugh, but I don't cross him, I just know when to stay out of his way.

Shibe Park and nearby Baker Bowl, where the Phillies play, provide many challenges; sneaking into the ball game, for one. Thousands of kids live in the row houses of North Philadelphia within a home run blast of the parks. Day after day we watch with resentment as busloads of kids are driven in from outlying towns and suburbs for a free day at the game. The tougher kids, looking for a way to get even, have found a satisfying one. They simply stand nonchalantly near the buses as the out-of-towners get off, and watch for an opportune opening. As some unsuspecting tyke stands gaping at the stadium roof or at the hot dog vendor across the street, one of the locals slips up next to him, snatches his admission badge from his shirt (and perhaps swipes his lunch, too) and dashes into the ballpark with the other fans.

Whether scaling the wall, razzing the players or heckling one another, the fans often provide as much entertainment as the game.

Two brothers, Eddie and Bull Kessler, known as "The Hucksters," are leather-lunged fanatics notorious throughout the league for raising the art of needling to new heights. They have seats in the lower grandstands, one behind third base, the other behind first, and though they never seem to be shouting, their deep powerful voices rattle our windows and reach people in the block

behind us. Day after day, weekday or weekend, they are at the game, exchanging barbed comments for the enlightenment of the spectators and the chagrin of the players and umpires who are objects of their scorn. Like typical Philadelphia fans, they are just as hard on the home team as the visitors. People say Connie Mack has offered to admit them free- with the stipulation that they go easy on the A's, easy on Jimmy Dykes in particular. That roly-poly free spirit of the team is said to be turning into a nervous wreck at third base from the heckling that pours out from the adjacent grandstand.

The Hucksters are relentless against opposing pitchers. In the early innings they test out their target with a variety of barbs, searching for a vulnerable spot. Most of the major league pitchers are able to ignore this, but if one shows a reaction or if a rally gets started, they step up their pace and volume, and the rest of the crowd soon joins in. No game is ever out of reach with the combination of the A's booming bats and the Hucksters' booming voices.

Against the Yankees, however, it seems like nothing can prevail. Their Godlike sluggers have been belting out homers at an unheard-of pace. At Shibe Park, the low right-field fence is a left-handed power-hitter's delight, and Babe Ruth is the ultimate left-handed power hitter. Many of his homers clear the fence by such a margin that they land on the rooftops. One behemoth blast may have been the longest ball ever hit. It sailed high over our roofs, over our back yard, over the roofs of our Opal Street neighbors, and smashed the upstairs window of Russell Frain's house on the far side of Opal Street.

Jimmie Foxx hit one that might rival it. The papers said it cleared the high roof of the left-field stands by a wide margin and then crossed Somerset Street, sailing over the houses and the parking lot in back before taking a sudden drop down into the lot

where it "was retrieved by a Somerset Street urchin". That's when I learned what Dad meant when he said not to believe everything you read in the newspapers. I was one of the Somerset Street "urchins" and I knew it hadn't dropped suddenly; it had hit high on the side of a building *beyond* the parking lot and bounced back. We stood with the ball outside the stands trying to get a response from one of the crowd near the open screen in the upper deck. "Hey Mister, who hit it? Hey, Mister, who hit it?" After we hollered this over and over, a man finally gave in and shouted in a disgusted voice, "Jimmie Foxx." We just looked at one another and nodded knowingly. Who else?

At our house, of course, we have a special perspective on the A's. We don't even have to go up to the roof to see the action. Because Shibe Park's right field fence is only 12 feet high, we enjoy a clear view of the field from our front bedroom with its set of portable bleachers. Benches in the front are close to the floor and each set is a foot or so higher as you move back, until people sitting in the last row have their heads up near the ceiling. To permit a better view, we remove all four of the windows and store them in the basement during the baseball season. Most of our neighbors do the same thing. We usually charge 50 cents to see the game from our house, the same price as the lower left-field bleachers in the ballpark. The bedroom bleachers are a necessity because only a few people are permitted on each roof. The maximum number involves some controversy with the Department of Licenses and Inspections and the Fire Marshal. Both offices, Dad feels, are paid by Connie Mack and the rest of the A's management to harass us for going into the baseball business for ourselves. He says that, in Chicago, the ballpark owners have a live- and-let-live approach to their neighbors who have fans watching games from their roofs, but that Mack and

the rest of them are a bunch of penny pinchers.

About an hour before game time, Mom reminds my brother and me to go to the bathroom before the crowds start coming in. This is not mere maternal concern. The ladder from the bathroom reaches up through the skylight, to provide access to the roof. It is possible to use the bathroom with the ladder in there during the game, but it is inconvenient, and privacy is never assured. One of my father's pet projects is trying to convince the neighbors to band together and finance a set of bleachers on our roofs, to extend the length of the entire block. Included in these plans is a sturdy flight of steps from the back yard to the roof, to eliminate the need to go through the bathroom.

Such is the belief of Americans in the late 1920's. A young country with limitless opportunities for people who hear opportunity knock, whether she knocks on the front door or on the skylight; people who are willing to put up with a few inconveniences and put in a little extra work can get ahead. Bootblacks can become millionaires if they have ambition; janitors with ingenuity can become company executives. For us, success beckons in the form of the Great American Spectacle right in front of us. Particularly, Dad emphasizes, if we can get those stands on the roofs.

My father is nearly six feet, trim and athletic with fair skin, bright blue eyes and blond hair parted in the middle and kept slicked down flat. Some people say he looks like Fred Astaire, but Dad is not that thin. At Northeast High School, he had starred in baseball, basketball, soccer and track--a "four-letter man." He had offers of a college scholarship for basketball and a minor league contract for baseball, but he and his parents took for granted that, after completing high school, it was time to get a job. He obtained one with Strawbridge and Clothier Department Store where one of his

duties was playing on the company baseball team. On another job, he made more money playing semi-pro baseball on the weekend than on his job during the week. He enrolled in some business courses at night, learned plumbing from his father and after a few years settled in at a job at Seville's, a small plumbing supply firm near 2nd and Lehigh. It is owned by two brothers,: Tom Seville, who has little involvement with the company, and Bob who takes an easygoing approach to running the business and spends much of his time at ball games and the racetrack, or bowling, playing cards and attending other social activities. He leaves the day- to- day work in the hands of my father who serves as a combination of sales manager and office manager. Dad worries that no one is doing any planning for the future of Seville's, and he talks about raising enough money to start his own business. In the meantime, he enjoys the relaxed atmosphere of the place and the flexibility the job gives him, particularly during the baseball season. On afternoons when the A's are playing at home, he usually manages to get to our house before the game rather than leave the work involved with our patrons in the hands of my mother**.**

On this day, we are expecting a big crowd for the game with the Yankees . Dad has been tied up at work and is a bit late in getting home. He bounds up the stairs two at a time. I can hear him exchange greetings with the customers who are waiting in the front bedroom ready to make the ascent to the roof. Then, "Damn! Where's the ladder… Isabel! ***What happened to the ladder?"***

During the season, the ladder is stored in the front bedroom under the benches, where it can easily be moved into the bathroom before game time.

"Isn't it in the front room?" Mom asks weakly. Then, suddenly remembering, she gasps, "Your father borrowed it

yesterday. He said he had an emergency job and he'd bring it right back. What are you going to do? Can you borrow one from somebody?"

"Who"? He retorted. "Everybody on the block needs his ladder to get customers on the roof." He paces back and forth as I try to keep a safe distance and still see what is happening. Quickly he decides, "I'll get 'em up without a ladder, then go get it back from Pop during the game so we can let 'em back down."

"Now, Jack, you don't want to hurt yourself," Mom cautions, but he ignores this and goes back upstairs to the waiting men. "Now listen, we don't have the ladder today, but I'll get you up on the roof. Just give me a hand." He leads them into the bathroom and steps gingerly from the toilet seat to the tank with the men supporting him; then they boost him up until he manages to grab hold of the edge of the skylight. He struggles to prop it open. Finally, it moves enough so he can get his head and shoulders through. With his elbows on the roof, he edges it open with his shoulders until he is able to wriggle up and roll onto the roof. After the skylight is moved back out of the way, he reaches down and hauls each of the men up onto the roof. The men are laughing and a couple of them start singing, "Oh, take me *up* to the ball game…" He makes sure the customers are settled, then dangles from the edge of the skylight and drops back into the bathroom.

"You're going to ruin your back lifting those men like that" my mother warns.

He ignores her unwelcome solicitude and concentrates on the business at hand: "Now, I better go get that ladder from Pop."

"Can't you take the car and tie it on some way?" Mom asked.

"No, it'll be faster to walk and carry it," he mutters as he moves out the front door and heads down the street. It is about a

fifteen-minute walk to my grandparents' house. When a half-hour has gone by and Dad has not returned, Mom walks out on the front porch and looks down the street for him in vain. I join her while she wonders aloud about various calamities that might have struck. Still, he fails to appear. Finally, my brother Gerry spots him from the back window. "That must be Dad, now, comin' up the alley," he calls out. Sure enough, as I rush to the back of the house, I see a ladder sticking up over the fences behind the backyards and bouncing along the alley toward our house. We stare out the window as his head and arms appear above the wooden fence. Then a leg is thrown over it, and he drops down into the yard. Once settled, he maneuvers the ladder over the fence and carries it in through the kitchen.. "What in the name of common sense are you doing coming up the alley?" my mother can't resist asking.

"Oh, I like the alley," he counters, his voice dripping with sarcasm. "It's fun to kick the garbage cans and stir up all the dogs on the block, and it has a grand perfume, too."

A few minutes later, after getting the ladder upstairs, he is noticeably calmer. He brushes off the front of his pants with his hands and shakes his head. "Damnedest thing! Picked up the ladder from Pop's basement, lugged it over the bridge and down to Lehigh Avenue. Just as I got to the corner, Charlie the cop spots me. "Where do you think you're goin' with that ladder?" he says, munching on a hot dog.

'I live on this street,' I tell him.

"Oh, yeah," he says, 'I got enough trouble keeping nuts from shinnying up that wall. I'm not lettin' anybody up this street with a ladder.

"A man's got a right to go up the street to his own house" I tell him.

"Well," he says "if you live here *you* can go up this street, but the ladder can't."

"I saw there was no use arguing with him, so I circled around the block and up the alley."

"Well, boys," he adds, "anybody wanna go up on the roof and see a couple of innings"