



WALTER JOHNSON

BASEBALL'S BIG TRAIN

by Henry W. Thomas
Submitted by Cyndi Wray

When the Washington Senators baseball team took the field it was behind the broad shoulders of Walter Johnson, and this time their hero did not fail them. In danger in every one of the four innings that he worked, he rose superbly to every emergency. In each succeeding crisis he became a little more the master, a little more the terrible blond Swede of baseball fable. Twice he struck out Long George Kelly when the game hung by a thread so fine that thousands in the tense, silent throng turned their heads away with every pitch.

To the victor belong the spoils. When future generations are told about this game they will not hear about Barnes, or Frisch, or Kelly, or even about Harris or McNeely. But the boy with his first glove and ball crowding up to his father's knee, will beg: "Tell me about Walter Johnson."

(Of his nationality Johnson remarked, "Well, to tell the truth, we're just about as plain, old-fashioned American as could possibly be," and this is no exaggeration. He was a 10th-generation American on the side of paternal grandmother Phoebe Higbee Johnson), their ancestor Edward Higby having arrived from England in 1645 to marry Jedidah Skidmore, who by the time had already been in the colonies for ten years. The Johnson line went back at least five generations to Samuel Johnson of New Jersey during the Revolutionary period. His mother's forebears, the Perrys, were also in the area at about the same time. The Johnson and Perry families, in fact, took remarkably similar journeys across the country: from New Jersey to Pennsylvania, then to Ohio, and finally on to the Great Plains, they traveled the well established route of migration to the West. The great rivers, the Allegheny, Ohio, Missouri, and Mississippi served as the common "highways" taking people to a new life in the territories.

Johnson's maternal grandfather, John Lane Perry, survived four years with the Fourth Pennsylvania Cavalry in the Civil War, fighting at Bull Run, Antietam, and Gettysburg. At war's end he joined his parents in Ohio, and it was there he met Lucinda Bradley, whose own parents had died when she was an infant. They married in 1866 and moved the next year to Richmond, Indiana, where their first child, Minnie Olive, was born. In the spring of 1875 with five children in tow, **John and Lucinda Perry moved westward to Dixon, Missouri.**

FRANK AND JESSE JAMES SPEND NIGHT IN DIXON

Dixon was in the heart of an area terrorized by the infamous Confederate guerrilla band of William Quantrill and "Bloody Bill" Anderson during the long and bitter Kansas-Missouri border war. Denied amnesty when peace was declared at Appomattox, the Missouri guerrillas returned home as outlaws. Some, like **Cole Younger** and the **James brothers**, stayed together to apply tactics learned during the war to the robbing of banks and trains. Minnie Johnson would tell the story of the time three tired and hungry strangers rode up to the

Perry farm asking if they could stay the night in the barn. Her father agreed, but kept himself awake all night to make sure they didn't steal his horses. The next morning while Lucinda Perry made breakfast for everybody the men chatted with eight-year-old Minnie on the front porch. A bluejay landed on a fence some 20 yards away and one of them twirled his pistol and fired, dropping the bird with a single shot. After breakfast, the strangers thanked the Perrys for their hospitality and rode off. Later that afternoon a posse came by and the family learned that their guest had been none other than **Frank and Jesse James.**

In March of 1884. John Perry moved his family, soon to fill out the ten children, across the border to Iola, Kansas. A short time later Minnie Perry met Frank Johnson at a little country dance in nearby Humboldt, Kansas, and they were married on July 2, 1885. Frank's parents, Nathaniel and Phoebe Higbee Johnson, had only recently moved with their eight children to Kansas. Now the newlywed Frank and Minnie Johnson settled onto their own 160 acre farm in the Neosho Valley of Allen County, Kansas, about three miles north of the town Humboldt. A year later their first child, Effie Belle, was born, and it was at the farm on November 6, 1887, that **Walter Perry Johnson** came into the world.

Young Walter chased hogs and chickens around the yard and tried to ride his father's colts, who didn't take kindly to his attempts at breaking them in. Animals would be a major interest throughout Johnson's life, and by all accounts he had a natural way with them. "He was always catching wild animals and trying to tame them," his brother, Earl, recalled. "He was fearless as a youngster, and I remember once when my sister, Effie, and Walter and I saw a large gray wolf in a field. We got the dogs and chased the wolf into a den under a rock. Walter found another den a few feet away, crawled in and pulled out five young wolves. Had the dens been connected, the mother would have torn him to bits." Hunting was also part of the pioneer life, though, and Walter learned to use a rifle as soon as he was big enough to aim it. His prowess with another weapon was probably the first indication of an unusually sharp eye-hand coordination. "He was an amazing shot with a sling," Earl Johnson remembered, "and could hit squirrels up to 60 feet."

The youngster were assigned chores as soon as they were able to do them, and when they got older the boy helped with the harvests, putting in long hours in the fields with their father. In later years Johnson would credit his physical strength and endurance to the hard work and wholesome outdoor life of his youth. The development of his personality and character, which would be such a prominent part of the Walter Johnson story, was no doubt largely due to the influence of his parents.

Reprinted from the First 100 years of Crocker

In the eighteen sixties and seventies, Jesse James (1847-1882) and Frank James (1843-1915) frequented the backwoods trails