

Home	<h2 style="text-align: center;">The Ringer</h2> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>by Jerry Keenan</i></p> <p>Davey lounged on his bicycle, one leg draped half-way over the side, the other resting on the ground. Both hands were sunk deeply in the pockets of his Mackinaw coat and an aviator style helmet covered his ears. The stick of a root beer sucker projected from the corner of his mouth. It was a clear, cold, mid-winter afternoon, with a thin sun that hung seemingly without warmth in a wan blue sky.</p> <p>He had positioned his bike against the west wall of the depot where he was exposed to what little warmth the winter sun provided. Additionally, the pot-bellied stove in the depot was close to the building's west wall which benefitted from the largesse of its heat and in turn unselfishly shared it with Davey.</p> <p>Davey often stopped here on his way home from school to watch the four o'clock west-bound train. Few passengers got off in Taylerville, especially in mid-winter. Still, one could never tell who might arrive on any given day, and on more than one occasion there had been an interesting character or two. Never would he forget the day that the tall, black-caped figure in top hat with a monkey on a leash had stepped off the train, by mistake, as it turned out. Davey learned later the man was a magician and had gotten off at Taylerville because he was inebriated and had lost track of where he was. Since the next east-bound train was not until the next day, the magician, being in rather desperate straits, was forced to sleep on a bench in the depot, said bench being granted him through the courtesy of the station master who took pity on the poor fellow.</p> <p>Not everyone was quite so colorful of course, but new arrivals interested Davey and he maintained a record of sorts in his Big Chief notebook. He imagined that one day he would be a newspaper reporter and write stories about interesting people.</p> <p>Presently, a whistle from the west signaled the arrival of the 4 o'clock train and minutes later, the engine squealed to a stop, belching a cloud of steam as it did so. At the end of the second passenger car, the conductor set his metal stool down and extended a hand to help a middle-aged woman, who Davey recognized immediately as Mrs. Fergus, returning from one of her periodic visits to her daughter and granddaughter in Chicago.</p> <p>But it was the second passenger to alight from the train that caught and held Davey's eye. He was middling tall and walked with a quick, decisive step. Davey judged him to be in his mid-thirties. He wore a dark brown top coat with turned-up collar, and carried a grip in each hand. A flat tweed touring cap, cocked slightly to one side, just enough to provide a bit of dash, rounded out the picture. As he strode past, the man nodded briefly to Davey, flashing a quick, soft smile as he did so.</p> <p>Davey maintained his post for a short time after the stranger had passed, chewing thoughtfully on his root beer sucker.</p> <p>"Saw a man step off the train yesterday afternoon," Davey announced over breakfast the next morning. Stranger. Never saw him before."</p>
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“Mmmm,” Grandpa muttered as he perused the *Des Moines Register*.

“Who do you suppose it would be, George?” Grandma asked.

Engrossed in the news, Grandpa did not respond immediately. “Name’s Zach Gordon. Carpenter and handyman,” he said, at length. “Jake Crawley hired him.”

“Goodness,” Grandma said, “didn’t think Jake was that busy. Where’s he from?”

Grandpa lowered the paper slightly, peering over the top at his wife. “You’re sure full of questions, Edna.”

“Just like to know somethin’ of my neighbors, is all.”

“Uhuh, Well Chicago or maybe Cincinnati, I forget,” Grandpa said.

“How come you know about him, Grandpa?”

Grandpa lowered the paper again and looked at his grandson, a twinkle in his blue eyes. “Barbershop’s the best place in town to get the latest news, Davey.”

As winter wore on, Davey would occasionally see Zach Gordon around town on one job or another and one Saturday morning he was in Grandpa’s chair when Davey came in to get a haircut. Remembering what Grandpa had said about picking up the latest news, Davey thought Zach might say something, but no words were exchanged.

Spring came on, all too slowly at first, and with mischief aforethought, teasing its way into a person’s heart, then withdrawing at just the last moment to let winter have one more crack before closing the door for good. At this time of year, Davey’s mind began turning toward baseball, although the game was never really very far from his thoughts. He and Grandpa were both voracious readers of the *Sporting News* and spent many winter hours discussing the forthcoming season.

But as the days began to lengthen and the mounds of snow in the sheltered places slowly disappeared, Davey grew anxious for the real thing. There were pick-up games after school and on Saturdays and on other occasions he and his friend Roger played catch and hit fly balls to each other. Davey greatly admired the Tigers second baseman, Buford Gridley and worked hard to emulate his classy fielding style, which meant having Roger hit plenty of grounders to him, but fly balls were the most fun to catch; the towering kind that you really had to get under.

But spring in its capricious way continued to stall. One day the sky was a lovely robin’s egg blue, the next churned and roiled, with dark clouds scudding across the heavens driven by a fierce, sharp wind. And the rains came; once three days straight with hardly a respite. Creeks and ponds were bloated with a surfeit of water. On those occasional days when the weather seemed ready to brighten, Davey would ride out to the ballpark to assess the conditions. The infield was covered with pools of standing water and the

outfield, he was sure, was as spongy as that swampy area out north of town.

Then, as it always does, the rains let up, skies cleared, and the temperature began to climb. Gradually the infield puddles dried-up and by mid-May, with the spring planting mostly finished, the Taylerville Tigers held their first real workout of the young season.

On a fine, warm Saturday afternoon Davey was sitting on the bench in the dugout, which was not much more than a small fenced-in area where the Tigers sat during a game. There was a similar enclosure on the opposite third base for the visiting team. Davey's regular position was next to his friend Mugwump Muckleby. Mugwump, or Muggy as he was affectionately known, had been an outstanding player in his day, known throughout the league for his excellent fielding and powerful bat. Indeed, the last time the Tigers won the championship had been Muggy's final season and that was a few semesters back. Muggy was not a man of many words, nor was he known to have many close friends, but in Davey he found a true companion, perhaps seeing in the boy the son he never had.

On this day, the finest of the spring by far, Davey and Muggy watched the Tigers work out, some slapping fungos to the infielders, while others hit long drives to the guys out in the corn. It was good, Davey thought, to once more hear the crack of the bat in the spring air. The Tigers' first game would be the first Sunday afternoon in June; it had become a tradition to have that first game on the Sunday preceding the Decoration Day holiday.

Presently Zach Gordon stepped up to the plate to take his cuts. Davey hadn't known Zach was even a ballplayer until Grandpa mentioned it one evening a week or so ago. Now as Davey and Muggy looked on, Zach drove a pitch into the deepest part of center field; then a second and a third. Davey was mightily impressed with Zach's powerful and fluid swing.

Presently Muggy arose and sidled over to have a chat with team manager Bert McGrew about something or other. About the same time, Zach finished taking his cuts and walked over and sat next to Davey.

"I'm Zach Gordon," he said extending his hand. "You must be Davey. I hear you're a pretty fair glove man."

Davey nodded, accepting a big, bronzed carpenter's hand, feeling the power in its grip. "Buford's been helpin' me."

"You've a good teacher," Zach said. "Buford's a mighty fine shortstop."

"I'm not much with a bat, though," Davey said, frowning slightly.

"Well, might be that I can help you a little there."

"Boy, I'd sure like that," Davey said, a broad smile spreading across his features.

"Sure. stick around after practice and we'll work on it," Zach said.

When Muggy returned, the team split into two sections and began an intra-squad workout. They lacked enough players for two complete squads—seven

on one, six on another—but the workout served its purpose, allowing the Tigers to hone their skills in preparation for the season’s first game.

“Zach said he’d help with my hitting,” Davey said.

Muggy nodded. “Well, he knows how to handle a bat, that’s for sure.”

Davey started to add something, but Muggy continued. “I’ve seen him somewhere; seen that swing, but the name doesn’t register.”

“Where’d you see him?”

“Don’t rightly know just off,” Muggy said. “but it’ll come to me.”

During the next few weeks, Zach and Davey worked together. Zach had three cardinal rules that he made a point of drumming into Davey’s head.

“Keep your eye on the ball, Davey, Keep the bat level when you swing and wait for your pitch.”

At Zach’s suggestion, Davey wrote down these three rules on a large sheet of paper, and in large letters. He tacked the sheet to the wall next to his bed, where he could remind himself of the “three commandments,” as Zach called them, each night before going to sleep.

Gradually, with Zach’s guidance and encouragement, Davey began to see a marked improvement in his performance at the plate. Previously he had been prone to striking out a great deal, but now even if he didn’t get a hit he was making solid contact with the ball. Muggy had always urged him not to worry about hitting a home run; to just concentrate on getting a hit and Zach reinforced this philosophy.

“Don’t try for the long ball, Davey,” Zach said. “Use your bat to get on base. The extra base hits will come in good time.”

As the season got underway, the Tigers showed immediate improvement over the past season’s performance. They began winning consistently and it was not to be denied that Zach Gordon’s bat had made a tremendous impact. But it wasn’t just Zach’s bat. He seemed to instill a new sense of confidence in the team. The Tigers began to believe in themselves in a way they had never been able to do in the past. Even Muggy had to admit that they seemed reborn.

By late June the Tigers had emerged as the league’s front-runner. They had split a two-game series with their arch rivals, the powerful Briscoe City Bulldogs and now both teams were pointing toward the big July 4th double-header. Everywhere in town folks seemed to walk a trifle taller; their heads held just a bit higher. Not since the halcyon days of young Mugwump Muckelby had the Taylerville Tigers commanded such respect.

The Fourth of July dawned clear and bright. Not a cloud dotted the great vault of sky, from which a brassy sun drenched the countryside. It was Iowa. It was mid-summer, and it was hot. The Fourth was Davey’s favorite holiday.

Christmas was always exciting, but July 4th was special. There were stands down the length of Main Street where one could buy a cold pop, lemonade or

a hamburger, or hot dog, or maybe some popcorn. There would be ice cream, too, fresh-made ice cream. And at night there would be a dazzling display of fireworks to light up the summer sky above City Park. But most important was the big double-header with Briscoe City. Like the Tigers, Davey had been looking forward to this day with powerful anticipation. He fantasized about the Tigers taking both ends of the double-header. Wouldn't that just be something!

The game got underway at One P.M. with scarcely an empty seat in the stands and many standing wherever they could find a good spot. Two bus loads of Bulldog fans had come over from Briscoe City to cheer on their team. The Tigers took the opener on the strength of a pair of two-run homers, one by Zach Gordon that propelled the Tigers to a 6-3 win. In game two, a masterful pitching performance by Harvey Bennett, coupled with a 5th inning, bases-loaded double by Zach carried the Tigers to a 7-1 sweep.

When the final out of the second game was recorded, the euphoria that gripped Taylerville was a thing to behold. Grandpa declared he hadn't seen the town in such an excited state since Armistice Day, 1918. Davey was swept along with the tide of revelry. He could scarcely contain himself. This day's big victory meant that the Tigers were now sitting in the catbird seat, a pair of games ahead of Briscoe. And when was the last time that had happened? Of course there was a small matter of the rest of the season, but no one doubted that the way the Tigers were playing there was any question as to who would wind up on top come the end of the season.

So Taylerville celebrated and basked in the glory of their team's mighty achievement. When darkness settled in, fireworks filled the summer sky with a dazzling multi-colored display, more spectacular it seemed than anything Davey had ever witnessed. This was truly a July 4th that would be long remembered in Taylerville.

But gradually life in and around Taylerville returned to a semblance of normalcy, though for Davey he kept replaying the two games over and over in his mind's eye. It was tough to let go of such excitement. He wanted to savor the thrill again and again.

It was near the end of the week following the game that Davey chanced to notice Bert McGrew at a corner table in McDonald's Café, having what appeared to be an earnest discussion with three other men. One of the men, Davey knew was Clem LaPorte, manager of the Briscoe City Bulldogs, but other two men were complete strangers. That evening, Davey mentioned it to Grandpa during supper. Grandpa took a moment to answer.

"Don't know what that might have been about," he said; "probably something to do with league rules."

Grandpa's answer seemed a perfectly logical explanation and Davey thought no more about it. The next evening, however, Grandma's comment shed new light on the matter

"I saw Hazel Crawley at the butcher shop this morning and she told me there was some kind of problem about this Zach Gordon fella."

"What problem?" Davey asked, his voice edged with concern.

“Well, goodness, I’m not really sure. Do you know, George?”

“There seems to be some hitch or other,” Grandpa said from behind his paper, “but I don’t know any more than that.”

“Well, goodness, what might that be?” Grandma muttered.

After a long silence, Grandpa said. “There’s a meeting tomorrow evening. I expect we’ll know more after that.”

There was more to it; unfortunately, a great deal more, as Davey learned over breakfast the morning following the big meeting.

“Zach Gordon will be leaving the Tigers,” Grandpa announced.

“What...but why?” Davey blurted out.

“It’s a complicated thing, Davey,” Grandpa replied. “You see Zach Gordon’s a professional and professionals are not allowed to play in an amateur league. He’s what’s called a ringer.”

“A ringer,” Davey said.

“That’s right. A ringer is a professional brought in to play in an amateur league.”

“Who’d he play for?”

“The Cincinnati Reds, I believe, and maybe the Cubs, too. I’m just not sure about that part of it,” Grandpa said.

“If he’s a professional, what’s he doing in Taylerville?” Grandma asked.

Grandpa poured himself another cup of coffee. “Well, seems he got into some trouble and was banned from the majors. He was a friend of Jake Crawley’s cousin and since he had been trained as a carpenter before he got to the majors, Jake’s cousin arranged for him to come out here and work for Jake. And I guess Jake had the idea right off that he’d be a good fit for the Tigers.”

“Was he paid?”

“Jake paid his travel expenses and maybe a little bit beside.”

“Well it all sounds dishonest to me, George.”

Grandpa shrugged. “Depends on how you look at it, I guess.”

“Did you know about it?”

“Not exactly, but I heard talk in the shop from time to time.”

“Well, I’d have sure been against it had anyone asked me,” Grandma

declared.

“What kind of trouble was he in?” Davey asked.

“Gambling, they say.”

“So he won’t be on the team anymore.”

“Afraid not, Davey.”

There was a long silence, as Davey worked his mashed potatoes over with a fork.

“It’s not fair,” Davey said. Rising, he strode angrily out to the front porch and sat down on the swing which squeaked as it swung slowly back and forth.

Presently, Grandpa joined him and they sat together in silence, watching the fireflies winking in the darkness beyond.

“When I saw Bert and those other men in McDonald’s they must have been talkin’ about Zach.”

Grandpa nodded. “Besides Bert and Clem LaPorte the other two men were John Huxley and a Chicago sportswriter who just happened to see the Tigers when they played in Briscoe City and recognized Zach.”

“Muggy told me once he recognized Zach, but couldn’t remember his name.”

“Yes,” Grandpa said. “I think Muggy has known for a while.”

“What will happen now? Will Zach leave town?”

Grandpa nodded. “I ‘spect so. The Tigers will have to forfeit those last two games and since he can’t play anymore, there’s no reason for him to stay.”

“Team won’t be much good without him...”

“Davey, remember, there’s eight other men on the team and as good a ballplayer as Zach is he didn’t win those games by himself.”

“Do you think it was wrong, Grandpa? I mean you know, having Zach on the team and all.”

“That’s not easy to answer, Davey, but your Grandmother was probably right when she said it sounded dishonest.”

“I suppose so,” Davey said, “but it seems okay to me. I mean he lived and worked here just like everyone else on the team.”

“Yes, that’s so, but the league has a rule, Davey: no professionals.”

“But he’s not a professional now...”

“No but he was and may be again. It’s important to abide by the rules, Davey. You can’t just break them for one person.”

“There is a bright note here, though. “The Tigers are a better team because Zach Gordon was here for a time,” Grandpa added after a long silence and getting to his feet. “Oh nice shooting star,” he said pointing to the sky.

“There’s another,” Davey added.

“I’m going to turn in. G’night, Davey.”

“Night, Grandpa.”

Presently the headlights of a car came down the street and turned into the driveway, stopping in front of the house. Zach Gordon stepped out and walked up the stairs to the porch, carrying what appeared to be a bat. Sitting down next to Davey they rocked slowly back and forth in silence for a few minutes.

“You sure have pretty night skies out here and goodness, more stars than I realized existed,” Zach said at length.

Davey was silent.

“Guess you probably heard about me,” Zach asked.

“Sort of…”

“Like you to get it straight from me, Davey.”

“Okay.”

“First off, my name’s not Zach Gordon. Oh my middle name’s Zachary all right, but the rest of it is Floyd Gordien. Yes, I did play in the majors: a year with the Cubs and two with the Reds.”

“They said you got into trouble gambling,” Davey said.

Zach sighed deeply. “Suppose it’s true, far as it goes. This girl I was seeing, well, she had a brother who was a bookmaker and gambler. He was always in trouble. One day, Hank—that was his name—hits me up for a loan and I pass him fifty bucks, see. Trouble was that we were in a café at the time and there was this sportswriter sittin’ in the next booth. He recognizes both of us and writes a story about how Floyd Gordien was betting on baseball. Next thing you know I’m banned from baseball. Three years, the Commish said. They couldn’t afford another Black Sox scandal. He said my case would be reviewed after three years. I’ve got one more to go and I’m hoping maybe they’ll let me play again. And that’s the whole story, Davey.”

Davey was silent for a long moment. “Will you go back to Cincinnati now?”

“Morning train.”

“Well, guess I better be off,” Zach said. “Got to finish packing. Oh, almost

forgot. Want you to have this," he said, handing the bat to Davey. "It's a little heavy for you right now, but you'll grow into it."

"Thanks," Davey said softly.

"Be seein' you," Zach said, getting to his feet and starting for the car.

"Yeah," Davey muttered. "I'm glad you were here, Zach."

"Me too," Zach said. "The Tigers are a great team."

"We can still win the championship," Davey shouted as the car started up.

"Remember to wait for your pitch, Davey," Zach said as the car pulled away.

Davey remained on the porch for a time, fondling the bat, remembering what Zach Gordon had taught him. At length he arose and went into the house. Tomorrow, he thought would be a good day for batting practice.

Jerry Keenan's most recent publication is *A Life of Yellowstone Kelly* (University of New Mexico Press, 2006) A feature article on Kelly (*Montana: The Magazine of Western History*, Summer 1990) won the Western Heritage Wrangler Award from the National Cowboy Hall of Fame. His work has also appeared in *Wild West*, and *America's Civil War* among others. Book length publications include *The Wagon Box Fight An Episode of Red Cloud's War* (Savas/Combined Books, 2000); *Encyclopedia of the Spanish-American and Philippine-American Wars* (ABC-Clio, 2001), *Encyclopedia of American Indian Wars* (ABC-Clio, 1997; Paperback edition, Norton, 1999), and *Wilson's Cavalry Corps* (McFarland, 1998).

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