

The Early Years of 'Squirt' Malone

Richard W. Kelly

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Richard W. Kelly

THANK YOU

To all the men and women over the decades that gave up relationships, families, health, and sanity for the perfect entertainment art of professional wrestling

Before it All Began

I wish that I could recall what my early childhood was like. Maybe if I had written my memoirs when I was thirty I could have remembered, but this old brain does not recall anymore. I was born at the turn of the century, in fact, I was considered a new year's baby. Born January the first in eighteen hundred ninety-eight, the year of our lord. My father owned a ranch in Denton County, Texas. I was one of eight children. I had four brothers and three sisters. I landed somewhere in the middle.

I spent a lot of time in my youth raising cattle because that is what our family did. We raised cattle and sold them off to butchers, rodeos, farms, boot makers... I learned a lot in those days, but little of it stuck with me. I guess my connection to animals remained and if I had not worked with cows all those years I probably would not have been able to steal a horse at twelve and start my life. But, that is getting ahead.

I did not go to school much. I went on occasion and so did my brothers. I think our father thought that one of us might make something of ourselves, but he needed too many hands on the ranch to let us all go. We sort of traded off. I probably spent a couple months a year going to class. I learned how to read, how to do my arithmetic, and some basics

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civics. My sisters tended the calves and helped mama with the house. They did not have a chance in this world, but back then, they just dreamed of marrying well.

I also worked for Denton Record Chronicle in the winter months when the cattle prices were down. Less demand, you know. The winter did not have butchers and farmers competing with the rodeos and cattle drivers for available cattle. If I was not learning or tending to the herd, I was either in the town square trying to sell papers or hanging around the telegraph office waiting to hear about the wrestling matches.

I had an obsession with wrestling. There was something about the clash of two powerhouses putting one another into impossible positions and using both their physical dominance and their intelligence to out maneuver their opponent.

In 1907, a carnival came to town. It was the first time we had a carnival stop in Denton. We were one of the bigger counties in the state, but the town of Denton had maybe four thousand folks that were close enough to actually go to the carnival. More showed up than you would have thought, more showed up than the carnival folks had thought.

They did not stop because they thought it was a good place to make some money, but because there was damage to the old Kansas-Missouri-Texas rail line. It was a couple days before the line would be fixed and the carnies just figured they had set up the tent and make some money.

It is one of my first memories. I was just nine years old and I remember the whole family making the hike to the fairgrounds. It was one of the only times I remember the whole family going somewhere together. It was not the same back then, you did not just up and leave very often. There were things to be done and animals to be tended to. So, that carnival was a special treat that children today would not understand.

I can still feel the dust in the hot summer wind making me squint my eyes as I watched the big red tent come into view as we trudged across the university campus to reach the fairgrounds. It was a couple hour walk that would have been twenty minutes on horse, but we did not have five

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horses to take us all. I could not believe the size of the tent, I could see it from a mile away. The excitement built within my belly and I got more and more giddy until we reached the edge of the grounds where they had a humongous sign that we walked under that read 'Johnny J. Jones Exposition - The greatest feats of man under one tent, one midway, and one spectacle for the entire family'.

It was kind of like Christmas to me. I spent so much of my time working and learning when you got a chance to just have fun, it was special. Outside of Christmas where we got a new toy and a morning where pops did all the work this is the only memory I have of a moment in that family where we were all having a grand time.

I remember pops handing me four quarters. I had never held so much money. He assigned one of my sisters to stick with me. I can still hear his gravelly voice, "That money best last you both all day. I came here to see the show in the big top and play some midway games. The Wild West show is in the big tent around sundown and is a dime an entry. If you waste your money you will have to sit outside the tent and wait for us."

When those words disappeared into the scuttle of people and ring of the calliope, he dropped those coins into my hands and rubbed his heavy calloused hand across my forehead tousling my hair in the process. I drug my older sister, Mazy, with me as I took off down the dirt path between the shoddily made booths and small tents.

We went overboard. The amount of food we ate, the games we played, and the sideshows we saw. It was a glorious day for my childhood. Mazy and I shared a humongous turkey leg. I swear the thing was bigger than my head. But, I think most things back then seemed large.

But, nothing was as large as Farmer Slate. When I was questioning whether or not to spend a nickel trying to get into the hootchie dance show, I noticed a circle of people rooting someone on just past the tent. I walked over trying to see over the spectators when a man suddenly stood up. He towered over the crowd of people watching. He was tall and

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muscular which he had on display only wearing a pair of tight pants and boots. His hair was a mess and matched his thick and unruly mustache. He laughed in a deep powering rumble claiming that he pinned his opponent in less than ten seconds.

As I reached the edge of the circle of spectators, I could see another man, much younger, much smaller crawling away from the scene.

“Any other takers? Spend one minute with me Andrew the Farmer Slate without getting pinned and win fifty green backs.” The man said as he slowly turned in a circle with arms spread wide.

Eventually, I would come to learn that the Farmer was at the end of his career. And even though I had heard tales of his matches with Tom Stat, Billy Mulders, and Geoffrey Dubois, he was well past his prime. Just a few months prior to my meeting him, he had lost back-to-back matches to Fred Gottlieb and never rebounded.

But, at the time, I did not understand what an out of shape wrestler looked like. In my head, the man in that dirt circle beating up kids twenty years younger than him was a living God.

I stepped forward looking at the giant.

“Costs a dollar kid.” Mr. Slate looked down at me expecting me to take him on. I just shook my head and tried to mumble my awe and inspiration to him. He patted me on the head and pushed me out of the way to see if he had any other takers past me.

I watched for hours as he manhandled teens and young twenty-somethings taking each boy's dollar as he made him groan and scream in agony. After all the bravery had left the men and boys at the fair and the Farmer knew he wasn't making any more money for the day he knelt down next to me and handed me a small piece of paper with an address on it.

“Squirt, I see the look in your eyes.” He did not know it, but he just gave me a name. “That's the same way I looked at wrestlers when I was young. That address there is mine. I have a workout program that will help you get to where you need to be in the next ten years to try and

do what I do. Send me twenty-five dollars and your address and I will send you the program.”

The rest of that day is a blur to me. I think it was a blur when it happened also. My mind was so awestruck by a real life grappler that I did not know how to handle it. My sister ate ice cream and saw the gorilla show while I just waited patiently for her.

Even at the end of the night when everyone met back at the big red tent, I claimed I spent all my money and waited for the family. I already had it in my head that I was going to send off for that correspondence package.

I missed out on the Wild West show. From what I heard about it on the walk home and the research I have done in the rest of my life, I believe it to have been a knock off Wild Bill's show. But sitting on the dirt listening to what was happening on the other side of the tent, I could not have been more at peace.

I might have been the only non-carny out there. But, I watched the sunset while the carnival folks packed things up, shard some spirits, and collected their day's pay.

The walk home took twice as long, partially due to the lack of sunlight, partially due to our feet hurting. It did not matter to me, I was trying to devise a plan where I could make twenty-five dollars and start my journey to becoming a professional wrestler.

Planning for My Future

You had better believe that my mind was perfectly focused on making that twenty-five dollars. I put in extra work where I could. I also was not the most ethical of children, I pocketed extra change when selling papers, I took money that my parents had laying out and lost track of. But it took a long time. Twenty-five dollars was a lot of money in 1907.

I think it was after six months I started to think that it would never happen. Around this time, I confided in a friend at school. He was a very small kid for his age. He must have been a few years older than I was, but looked to be younger. He was full of hair, dark hair that invaded everything. His name was Trefor Baker. His family were bakers. They emigrated from Italy twenty years before and dropped their real last name because they did not want it known they were Italian. It was not a good time in the states for Italians. They had originally landed in New Orleans. But were ran out of town when the chief of police was shot to death by a supposed Sicilian. They fled to Texas.

Denton seemed like a good place for them to settle because of the huge alliance mill that towered over the town. Any place with that much focus on wheat would have space for bakers.

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One day at the schoolhouse Trefor and I were chosen to go get the water for the class. Back in those days, we did not have running water in the schoolhouse. Instead, we would make a trek a half mile to an old well. We would pump out a couple buckets of water and bring it back for the class.

During the walk there and back, I quizzed him on the carnival from the previous summer. I asked if he went, what he saw, and how much fun he had. It was so much fun reminiscing over that weekend. But, he had not seen Andrew 'the Farmer' Slate. I told him about the man and his physique. I reveled in the fact that I was telling the tale of this amazing man who was physically dominating every man and boy at the fair. Trefor was infatuated with the story. So much that we stopped halfway back to get it out of our system before we got back to class.

The importance of the conversation was him agreeing to go in with me on the correspondence course. It had been six months and I had collected three dollars, mostly in pennies. Trefor would scrimp and save with me and although it would take nearly a year from the time that I met the Farmer, we would be able to afford the training that I so desperately wanted.

I still remember the mailman seeing me in the barn on his way to our house and stopping to give me my first piece of mail. As an adult, we forget the magic of someone recognizing us. But, when I was ten years old and the mailman handed me a package with my name written on it, I wanted to jump out of my skin in excitement.

When you spend that much time and effort to acquire something you use it. We were desperate to become grapplers. Every time I saw a newspaper article about wrestling, I imagined it was me living the big life, fame and fortune within my reach. Trefor and I would talk about it at school and twice a week we would sneak out and work through the program.

We were too far out from the city to have electric lights back then and because of that, we still ran our lives off the sun. I would wait an hour

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or so after the sky went dark and then I would crawl out the window and head to the barn. It was over a little hill from the house and using a gas lantern was not visible from the house.

Trefor would show up whenever he could and we would go through the illustrations and explanations. We would take turns applying holds to each other, escaping holds, and learning combinations of moves that flowed with one another. I thought back then that I was learning a sport, but since I was working with a friend and we were attempting to perform these moves without injuring each other I was really learning more about the professional wrestling world than I realized.

This lasted for a couple of years. The course was very extensive. As time went on it dominated more and more of our days. I used my daily chores with the cattle as a way to get in some weight training. We would find ourselves at the square reading articles together about the latest wrestling bouts and who the champions were. And two nights every week, we would grapple throughout the night in my family's barn.

Even in school, we were usually reading or writing about wrestling instead of the subjects our teacher would suggest. I had become infatuated with the 1908 match between Gavrie Stepanchikov, the Russian lion who had been deemed the first world's champion, and Fred Gottlieb the sneaky German who mastered the toehold. Stepanchikov had been World Champion for three years after defeating the American champion.

The two met at Dexter Park in Chicago. Gottlieb pushed the limits of the rules and wrestled a rough bout, with some closed fists and questionable holds. Even though Stepanchikov had complained about Gottlieb being covered in oil, the first fall went just over two hours. When the men returned from the dressing rooms for the second fall Stepanchikov forfeited the match relinquishing the title to Gottlieb. I would be there for the rematch in 1911, but the wrestling world would have already changed my life by then.

I think it was mid 1910 when Trefor and I had finished the course in grappling. We had big plans to run away and join a wrestling troupe. I

think we would have if his family had stayed stable. A year earlier a bakery from Gainesville had expanded and moved into Denton. It would only take 6 months until Trefor's family bakery would go under. They sold the shop and took jobs in the alliance mill.

Trefor told me that he had let it slip that he wanted to be a grappler and his father was enraged that he would abandon the family. The next day he donned a black eye and lots of bruising which his father claimed proved he would not make it in wrestling.

I do not know that I ever believed the story. I still think to this day that he got in a scuffle with a family member, but used the story to break ties with me. Looking back the best thing I could have done for that boy was to encourage him to go help his family, they meant a lot to him. Me on the other hand, I had no emotional connections to my family. They were my coworkers at best and wardens at worst. The best thing Trefor could have done for me was to push me away to find his own path, and he did that. I am forever grateful to him.

But, his story also gave me the excuse to make my move. I could not risk the chance that Trefor's father would come and let my family know of my plans. I could not have my dreams ripped from me.

I remember that day seeing Trefor with all the bruising and swollen face. It bothered me. I was twelve years old and could only see the pain and misery. I could not see the love he had for his family, I could not feel the pressure for him to provide for those closest to him. All I could see was my friend giving up on me.

I spent that day on the square pretending to sell papers while I read through the Denton Record Chronicle and the Pilot Point Post-Signal trying to find some way out of town. From what I could tell there were no wrestling troupes anywhere near Texas in the heat of the summer. I would have to find a way to get to California or the northeast. My best bet was a carnival that was coming through Dallas in just over a week. I figured I could attach my hopes to their carnival and maybe they could lead me out of Texas to find my dream.

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It was an awful night. I spent most of the day dreading what I would do and when my parents finally went to bed I snuck out and headed to the barn. I sat there for hours before I got the gall to take one of the horses and head southeast. I think it was my childhood saying goodbye to what I knew of as life. Everything I had learned to love at that point had taken place around that barn. Even today, where I do not feel any real connection to my family, I think down inside, my soul wanted to mourn the end of that life. It wanted a few moments to recognize that my life was starting a new and I would not have the luxury of being a child anymore.

It was a dark night that I do not remember much of. I tried at first to ride by the lantern light mostly because if that horse had broken its leg I would have had no other choice but to return home. But, once I got to the train tracks of the Texas-Kansas-Missouri rail, I realized it was easier to just let the horse use the moonlight. I was only five or six miles out when we got to a bridge that we could sleep under for the night. The bridge is still there today, but it crosses Lewisville Lake now. If that lake had been there, I do not know what I would have done. I might have turned back if I did not find somewhere to sleep for the night.

My Foot in the Door

It took me three days to go the forty miles to Dallas. I should've arrived in a day, but being a child and my first time traveling I was worried about everything. I was afraid of tiring out the horse, scared of getting lost, and paranoid my parents may come after me. If nothing else, it was the best preparation for what would become a life on the road.

I stopped after the first day in Lewisville. It was a small town, might have had a few hundred residents at the time. My plan was to spend the night out in a pasture sleeping under the stars. It is kind of funny to think of it now, but the idea of sleeping alone, in the open at night was a core part of life back then. I understood the basics of fire, shelter, water, and food. It was something that everyone had to know back then.

But, that first night I did not end up sleeping outside. Instead, I met an elderly couple that took a liking to me. Her name was Nancy and her husband Neil were taking a stroll through town that afternoon. It is hard to not stick out in a small town. You are either someone everyone knows or you are not.

They had seen me stopping at a public water trough for my horse and called me over to them. Being the first people I spoke to since running

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away from my home, I was nervous. I remember making sure my horse was tied good to the post and walked over to the older couple with my riding hat held down in front of me. I was spinning it in circles keeping my hands doing something.

They were both very grey and had a bit of a stoop in their back. Their advanced age had taken their posture from them. Neil spoke slowly and with some deep vibrato in his voice, "What brings you to Lewisville, boy?" I continued to approach as Nancy lightly backhanded her husband, "Don't be rude!" She had a softer, smoother voice that didn't seemed as aged as her body.

I was very afraid my parents would be looking for me, a fear that was truly unfounded, so I tried to keep my story far enough away from the truth to not tip anyone off that may be looking for me.

"I'm coming from Pilot Point. Making my way down to Dallas. For work, for a living." I tried to sound like an adult as if I could fool them.

Nancy butted in, "What's your name young man?"

I grasped for something other than my real name. Anything but John Malone. The only thing that came to mind was Andrew "the farmer" slate calling me Squirt. "I go by Squirt, ma'am."

Neil retorted, "Mighty young man to be making that kind of journey alone." He smiled to show that he wasn't trying to be difficult.

"Sir, my father fell ill months ago. My mother left to remarry. I may be twelve, but I am out to make something of myself." I hoped the story would suffice. It wasn't outlandish or even uncommon. Children trying to fend for themselves before their teens was probably one in a hundred.

Nancy smiled and placed her head on her husband's shoulder. She squeezed his hand tightly speaking to him through their years of connection.

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“Grab your travel companion,” Neil motioned to my horse, “and come with us. We always make too much food and would be honored to hear your tale of adventure from Pilot Point.”

Over the years I have learned how to tell when someone is genuine and when someone wants something from you. I was probably lucky to have run into that couple when I was still at such an impressionable age. But, it was nice to be wanted.

I don't recall much of the conversation that night. I remember the incredibly dense cornbread they fed me. Like the child I was, I ate more than my share, but Nancy and Neil didn't mind. They had taken a liking to me because I reminded them of their own children. Of course their children were adults at this point. Adults who probably didn't give their parents enough attention anymore. Adults who were obsessed with their own problems.

Not that Neil and Nancy were bitter. They understood growing up. They knew they still had each other. And for one night I was there to remind them of their best times.

That night was amazing. Lewisville had electric lines run and there were street lights that illuminated the park with its little gazebo. Couples in love walked in the night under the halo lights of the street lamps. It was the most serene thing I would ever see. Felt like the world showing me I was making the right decision.

The second night I should have made the rest of the way to Dallas, but called it a day around Farmer's Branch. It was a small settlement that didn't consist of much more than a train station. I saw a general store and a few farms, but it was essentially just a blip on the rails of Texas. There weren't any troughs, I had to rely on the streams that ran off the nearby Trinity River.

It was the night that I expected. I caught a rabbit for dinner, made a fire, and slept under the stars.

The third day I rolled into Dallas. As I came into Dallas on Elm street I was surrounded by a bustling city. There were people up and down

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the porticos. Horses and buggies tied up at every store front. The sight was amazing, but the smell was pungent. Even with a city employee walking through the street picking up manure, there was still an overpowering stench that seemed to invade your entire body.

I had trouble dwelling on that when I had business to conduct. Not used to the city I realized that I was not likely to find a rancher about downtown looking to buy livestock. This was much more like the square in Denton where there were specific businesses that could house their inventory locally. The difference was in Denton two hundred yards off the square was a farm. Here it would be a full day's walk to get from a farm to downtown.

I rode in cautiously expecting to be questioned at every turn, but the city was too large and too self-absorbed to care about a random kid that came unaccompanied. I knew from the family business that a three-year-old steer was worth seventy-five dollars. I knew that a saddle horse would be worth much more. Plus, the saddle and dressings, I didn't need.

I surveyed the area as my horse slowly trotted down the beaten dirt road. Insurance companies, banks, cotton distributors. It was a city that was so far advanced from what I was used to. I eventually saw the Sam Freshman liquor and saloon. It was the only logical place I could stop.

I tied the horse to the hitch out front and headed into the saloon. It was dark and loud for an early afternoon. They had obviously closed off many of their windows thinking their new electric lights would illuminate the place, but those early lights were so dim.

The place featured a round bar in the center of the room with a handful of tables sprawled out around the outside of the room. On one side was a door that led out to Lamar street, on the other was a door that led to a handful of rooms the saloon rented out to out of towners. It was a practice that would die out in a couple years when the Adolphus hotel would put all the saloons out of the hotelier business. The place didn't feature a piano or a bunch of cowboys gambling like they show in the movies. Instead it was a bunch of men drunk in the middle of the day

making a ruckus in a room with a tiled ceiling that echoed the noise to unbearable levels. Dallas had come too far and evolved too much to be the old west that everyone likes to think it was. Half the men in the room were bankers that never learned the basics of life like catching a dinner.

I walked up to the bar, but gravitated towards the saloon girl as opposed to the bartender. It was probably my youthful-self trusting a motherly figure as opposed to a male, but it is something that I never really outgrew.

I approached the woman who was full figured in a corset that had given up at its job of holding the woman in many moon ago. She had long red hair and was obviously trying to cover up a few decades of aging under a few pounds of makeup. As I approached her she shook her head disapprovingly.

“Ma’am.” I said as I tipped my hat in her direction.

She let the corners of her mouth dip down. Her voice was deep, but she tried to raise it to be more feminine. “Please don’t tell me you are looking for a good time.”

“No ma’am. I was hoping to talk to someone about a room.” I replied trying my best to be respectful, cautious, but adult like all at once.

“And what is it you are planning on doing in that room? I may be here to keep this place afloat, but heaven knows you are still a baby and no how am I...”

I cut her off before she had more time to insult me. “No, ma’am. I’ve made my way down here from Pilot Point. I am looking to sew some new roots. I need a place to sleep for the next few days.”

“Child, I pray for whatever tragedy you had to endure that leaves one as young as you trying to start a new life. We have a room that runs three dollars a night.” She tried to reach out and pat my head like I was a puppy.

I squirmed out of the way. “Thank you ma’am. I need to find someone who will buy my horse, then I can pay for the room.”

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She put her arm around my shoulders and quickly walked me to the side door. "Your best bet is to go down Elm street to where the Mulattos and Chinese are. It's down near first, called Ellum." She whispered all this to me as she shuffled me out the door onto Lamar. "Bless you, child. And don't you take anything under a hundred for that horse. You should have sold it back north and taken a train down. Be careful everyone in Dallas is going to want to swindle you."

Basically thrown out the door I went around and mounted my horse. I took the slow path down Elm Street looking for First Avenue. The experience stayed with me for many years. At the time I saw a land of opportunity, businesses that existed to simplify life, people who had a singular purpose, and places that were existing for no other reason than to entertain people. In my young eyes it was the world I had dreamed of. Decades later in my older years I would see this all as the destruction of man's self-reliance. There is a benefit that I couldn't understand at the time that comes with the ability and passion to take care of one's self.

I continued to ride in my excitement which left pretty swiftly as the storefronts turned into residential porches. The street lights became fewer and farther between and the newer architecture was replaced by shotgun houses.

I should have been more at ease and more at home as the scenery became more and more like Denton, but I was very aware that I was suddenly the only person of white skin around me. There were a few huddled groups of Chinese off down the alleyways, but the vast majority of the people that were lounging on their porches and talking in their yards were black folks. Many of them looked up at me in confusion, but most of them kept to their selves. A few of them yelled out at me with what sounded like non-sense, "Lulsquatohkuck ohyout" or "Whackhasheyetutee bubohyub".

I had seen a black person or two in my lifetime, but in 1910 there was no love lost between the races in the south. As much as it appalls me now I feel that I was trained to distrust groups that I wasn't a part of. It

isn't something I blame on my family or even my community. It was the time and what our ancestors had put each other through. Just as I trusted and listened to my parents, the stories and ethics of my grandparents were somewhat bred into me.

I didn't get very far into Ellum before I was approached by a group of black men. They were all dressed better than anyone in my family with vests, hats, and shiny boots. They attempted to approach me in a friendly manner, but there was palpable caution being presented. The man in the front was short and stout. He displayed a wide grin that contrasted his dark complexion. He was flanked by two men on his right and one on his left, all taller and thinner. The smiling man raised his hand as he started to speak, "I think you might be a bit lost. This here is Deep Ellum. I have a feeling you are looking for the West End."

I slowed my horse, but remained saddled as I didn't think it was wise to give up my tall stature while riding. "I'm sorry to bother you fine folks. I am looking to plant some roots. I need to sell my horse and find some work."

There was a general chuckle amongst the men in the street. "I really think you want the West End." The smiling man paused thinking to himself before he resumed our dialogue. "No reason to pretend you don't see it. You in a negro neighborhood. Now, my brothers here don't have any problem with you coming through our neighborhood, but what happens when you sell us that horse of yours? Tomorrow you come back with your father or the sheriff claiming that we stole your horse."

I started to rebut, but the man continued.

"And you say you are wanting to work. Well, I suggest you head back to the West End where you can sell some papers or fill some troughs because out here in Deep Ellum you be unloading trucks, putting up buildings, repairing buggies, you know, real work." His statements brought support from the group of men at his sides.

I nodded my head understanding that we were on different teams and this wasn't going to be a marriage of convenience. "I understand." I

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turned my horse to start heading back to downtown. "But, I come from a cattle ranch north of here. I know what a day's work is. You don't trust me. I understand. But, if you could trust me would you be interested in the horse for one fifty?"

The men perked up at the price. They talked amongst themselves making me realize that I was still low balling myself.

Smiles called out as I was still slowly trotting away. "You selling that horse you sitting on for one hundred and fifty dollars?"

In a panic I responded, "Two hundred with the saddle, shoes, packs, and all." I hoped I was getting close to the actual value.

I was almost out of ear shot, so the man shouted back. "We would take that deal. But, we don't trust you, as you said." They all turned back and headed out of the street as I picked up my speed heading back to town.

It was less than two hours before I returned to their side of town. I was escorted by a Dallas county deputy. I had come accustomed to the presence of police being a positive thing. So, I didn't expect the reaction I got.

The smiling came out of his house at a swift jog. The smile had left and he was shouting with his fist up in the air, "I told you! You were here to set us up! We don't want you in our neighborhood you need to be in the West End!"

The deputy jumped down from his horse immediately placing his right hand on his revolver and his left hand up trying to calm the man. My fight or flight kicked in and I was off my horse holding up both hands at the deputy trying to hold back a fire fight. I dug as deep as I could let out a voice that shouldn't have been summoned by a child my age. "Hold on!" The deep bellow startled both men who silenced and stopped their forward motion. "I came here to sell a horse. I brought this deputy so you would have a lawman as an eye witness to the transaction. I need you to know that I am not going to welsh on our deal. If one of the two of you leave here with a toe tag, then this was a colossal failure."

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Smiley faced me, but kept his eyes locked on the deputy. He nodded his head slightly while licking his lips. “Sir, if you would take your hand off your gun I would feel much better about everyone’s motives here.” He watched as the deputy let go of the handle of the revolver and dropped his hand. Smiley visibly relaxed as the threat disappeared. He turned his focus to me and while he still had a fiercely serious look on his face he growled, “You are young so I am going to let it go. But, this could have been duck soup if you would have run it by me earlier. But you bring a lawman into this neighborhood unannounced and everyone here thinks they are going to the pokey.” With that he let his smile come back out.

Everything went well. I had two hundred dollars and ride back to town. The fellows in Ellum had a horse that was in good shape and could resell for a decent profit. And the deputy managed to not shoot anyone.

As I was riding off hanging onto the back of the deputy, Smiley was walking beside us. I asked him, “I don’t want to surprise you again, but I am going to show up here in the morning looking for work. I am not setting the roots I want selling newspapers to bankers.”

Smiley laughed at my tenacity. “Tell you what boy. Carnival coming into town on Tuesday. That’s your best bet. If you try and get anything before then the folks around here are going to assume you want to take all our jobs. So be here by sunrise on Tuesday and we’ll give you a lift to fair park.” He waved as he finished talking and walking.

I understood. I had enough money now to last me a few weeks, it wouldn’t hurt if I waited until Tuesday to find work. I had wanted to connect with the carnival anyway, I had no real plans of staying in Texas.

The deputy took me back to Sam Freshman’s saloon where I got my room, got some grub, and started to acclimate to life on my own.

A Day's Work

Spending five days in Dallas helped me come to terms with moving on from my family to whatever lay ahead of me. My hope was that Andrew “the farmer” Slate would be with the carnival that was coming to town. I figured if he was there I could show him what I learned from his course and he would take me under his wing.

I squandered a lot more of the money I made on the horse than I should have. Outside of the room and meals I decided that I should try a bit of life. It didn't take me long to convince the bartender to serve me. A legal drinking age of twenty-one had been passed in Texas just a few months beforehand, but the law in Dallas wasn't interested in busting saloons or children for having a beer. Not that it mattered much, I managed to choke down one beer before I switched to juice and water. Beer was something that I didn't develop a taste for until you could get them cold.

I tried convincing the madam of the saloon to sit with me, give me a dance. But, that was useless she would just shake her head and mourn for my lost childhood. I spent most of my time at the Dixie. It was a theatre that showed silent films with actors off the side of the screen

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reading the lines. I would spend a dime an hour staying in that theater for four or five movies at a time.

Having never seen a movie until that point I was mesmerized. I saw what are classics in my own head. I remember watching Ramona and Thunderbolt, but when they showed the Johnson vs. Jeffries boxing match it reinvigorated my passion for getting out there and becoming a grappler. It was called the fight of the century and had only taken place a few weeks before. Although the sport was different it still showed the passion of two men trying to best their opponent and a crowd of thousands cheering for their favorite. I wish I could describe what it is about a contest between two athletes and the adoration of their fans that motivates me. All I can explain is that my life would feel incomplete without it. That is why I had the drive to leave on my own. I knew that I was missing something and I had to go find it. I refused to be miserable forever.

Even though the saloon girl wouldn't take my money, when I found the nickelodeon in the back of the Dixie I realized what I was missing out on. It was tucked away in the back near a broom closet. It had an electric light that shone out from the middle and you peered into a pair of binoculars. There was a hand crank that would run hundreds of photographs in a circle which gave you the impression that you were watching a movie.

When you give a nearly pubescent boy a ten second movie of a woman taking all her clothes off, that boy will spend a nickel to see it every time. Even when he had just watched it. I don't doubt that I spent over ten dollars on that machine.

I also saw my first motor car that week. It was a loud, bouncy, smelly beast of a machine. It didn't handle the ruts in the roads very well. The ruts were there to allow for horses doing their business and it washing away, but the horseless carriage as everyone called it would get its wheel stuck in the rut and then it wouldn't be able to turn.

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If nothing else, that week gave the men of Deep Ellum time to build a little bit of trust in me. They knew by now that I hadn't set them up. I had done everything I could to work with them.

Tuesday morning, I made the walk down to their neighborhood. It was still dark outside, but late July in north Texas is a hot humid monster. I was drenched in sweat by the time I got to Smiley's house. I sat down on the edge of his porch and watched the sun peak over the horizon. It wasn't long before everyone started emerging from their homes.

A firm hand landed on my shoulder. "Good to see you came back." I looked up to see the familiar grin across the man's face. "I figured you to be working for a bank by now." He laughed as he helped me up to my feet.

I looked up into his eyes, "I told you I would be back."

He introduced me to a few of his neighbors, but it was more a polite gesture than anything. I didn't remember them and they only knew that I was the white kid that had sold the horse. We walked to the edge of the neighborhood to the Old Union Depot. I was told that when the train came in there would be a bunch of orders being barked out and it was a sink or swim type of moment. I could either join in and start working where I would end the day with a meal and some cash or I could head back to downtown where things weren't so in your face.

I truly wanted to prove myself, but just the image I created in my mind, I was afraid I would walk away. The clamor of men yelling at one another and moving heavy things sounded like a disaster area for someone my size. I remember standing there just trying to stay calm.

The train could be heard at quite the distance. Most of the men were joking around pretending to fight, talking about the happenings in the neighborhood, but I was stone still. I could have been a soldier at attention. My mind kept running through the mantra, 'Don't leave. You can do this.'

The train came into full view with what appeared to be hundreds of boxcars. It was a bit of a letdown, as a child I hoped to see colorful

boxcars with the carnival name on them. I imagined a couple of giraffe heads poking out the top of one car and the next an open air car with bars on the side displaying lions. But, as the train pulled into the station reality hit me that this looked like every other train with old beat up boxcars.

When the engine gave off a final hiss men started pouring out of the boxcars. A skinny man with a broken top hat and a thin pointy moustache started yelling at the crowd of black men. “We need the following items transported immediately! Tents, stakes, ropes, wood for the stalls, all canopies, signs, banners. Leave prizes, costumes, makeup, and props here. Do not mess with the animals our personnel will handle them.”

I, still standing at attention, was knocked out of my trance when smiley gave me a solid smack on the back. He broke into a jog and called back at me, “Grab something you can carry and find me and Abe.”

I quickly shook myself into reality and looked around for something small enough for me to carry. I noticed a couple boxcars down they were tossing ropes, clothes, canvas, tarps... into the street. I squirmed my way through the crowds of men and grabbed an armful of banners. Trying to stand up straight I was constantly pushed and bumped into. I held my ground decently, but I was starting to get disoriented. I looked around for Smiley, but I was in a sea of dark skinned men carrying heavy things and not paying any attention to someone like myself.

I slowly walked away from the train and towards the other side of the road. With banners in hand I surveyed the chaos from a few feet back. I didn't know what to do. I wanted to cry. I wanted to go back to being a child. But, it was too late. This was the life I had chosen. I started walking down the street when I looked up to see Smiley riding what used to be my horse, carrying a couple bundles of rope. He slowed the horse down and looked down at me. “Well, get up here on Abe. We'll take you down to fair park where they are setting up the carnival.”

It was odd how a person that I worked so hard to believe in me was now treating me with respect. I knew that I needed people looking

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out for me, but there was something about this relationship that gave me faith for the future. I hopped on and we headed southeast through the residential areas of Dallas.

It was a long day, but I learned a lot. I learned how to stake and raise a tent. I learned how to build midway stalls. I learned where you hang banners and how doing it in the right places brings attention to places you want attention and drive it away from places you don't. I even started to learn a bit about the freaks of the freak show and how normal most of them were.

Looking back, I am probably mixing lessons up with other days I was out with the carnival setting up, but my biggest memory of that first day was dinner. The man with the broken top hat had walked all around the carnival grounds telling everyone that they were calling it a night. The carnival would open on Thursday and there was a whole other day that would be spent with hard labor. When the man came to me he stopped and knelt down to meet me at my level. I remember how disturbed I was by his thick scraggly eyebrows. It seemed every hair in his face was a black wire that was out of control. He patted me on the head and handed me three dollars, "Good work kid. You looking to run away with the circus?"

We both laughed at his comment, but it really wasn't meant in jest. I looked into his eyes. "Not tonight. I'm staying at the Freshman Saloon. But, I was hoping to find a spot as a grappler." I tried my best to be a professional, but it didn't keep the moustache man from chuckling.

"You are a bit small to be challenging carnival goers. But, we are an ingenious group. I'll introduce you to Joe Johnson tomorrow. He is our strong man, maybe he will have some ideas for you. Find me in the morning. But for now, go get some grub in the main tent."

I went over to the big tent where Smiley and all his neighbors were eating and dancing. Everyone was in a great mood. It was a sight that didn't hit me back then, but it was the first time I saw all races intermixing. The lowest class of people, the gypsies, the nomads, the carnies... These were the people that were able to put race aside and treat everyone as

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equals. Nowadays, in my seventies I see it all the time, all across the country people are more and more open to one another, but back then no one who was an upstanding citizen would be caught dead mixing races.

I remember the huge chunks of beef they were carving off for the workers, the numerous cans of preserves everyone was digging into. I had never tasted food that meant so much to me. I had never tried food that had the taste of a day's labor built into it. I stayed and danced and ate with everyone else. Eventually Smiley brought me back to the saloon. I couldn't say thank you enough. It was the perfect day. It was proof that I was going in the right direction.

Joe Johnson

I didn't sleep much that night. In a way it was my first job interview. I tossed and turned all night excited about what I would learn about my future. Scenes played out in my head of being given an official job title where I followed Mr. Johnson around and learned from his tutelage. This wasn't the case.

I actually didn't meet Joe Johnson that day. They were filled with building structures, moving merchandise to its proper location, staging costumes for shows, and helping clean up after the animals.

It was a couple hours into the setup on Wednesday that Smiley realized I was being utilized for less strenuous tasks. Instead of erecting tent poles, I was getting clown makeup for the dressing rooms. He spent the rest of that day stuck to my side almost as if he was my guardian.

It was nice to spend the day with a familiar face, but I was constantly looking around and asking people about Joe Johnson. I was received with constant looks of confusion. It appeared no one knew who the man was.

About half way through the day the man with the broken hat noticed me organizing braziers in a small side tent. "You came back? Glad

to hear see it. Nothing warms my heart more than a boy putting in a day's work and becoming a man."

The hairy man stood as tall as he could while pulling down the sides of his lapels showing pride in me. I found it odd and at least a little disconcerting as I was a strange child in his eyes. But it did not matter this was my chance to meet Joe Johnson. I quickly hung the last of the braziers and stood at my full stature which was not even as big as the man in front of me.

"I was hoping to meet Joe Johnson today. Do you know where I can find him?" My breath was out of match with my speech. I couldn't help but let the nerves sound in my voice.

"Sorry. He is feeling ill. I have a feeling he had a bit of a bash last night. But he brings in enough that I can overlook that. Find him in the morning over by the dining tent. He will be performing tomorrow ill or not." He started to walk away, but I reached out accidentally looking like a child pulling on his dad's sports coat.

Trying to regain some stature and respect I choked out, "I just want to thank you for this." I put my hand forward looking for a handshake, what I thought to be the sign masculine maturity.

The man laughed to himself, "What's your name?" His demeanor softened as if he was dropping the act he had been putting on for my benefit.

I looked up and felt the urge to be as honest as I could. "My name is John Malone, but that is a life that I am leaving behind. I'd prefer if you call me Squirt."

The man with the broken top hat smiled at the idea that I had left something behind. "I think you are going to fit in here, Squirt. My name is Radisson. Many say that I was the son of a rat, but that is nothing but a tale to help me make some scratch."

Everything he said went over my head, but I tried to play it off. "Are you in charge of this whole show?"

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He knelt down to look me eye to eye. "I am the showman, that is true. You have a lot to learn to keep from being a gazooney, but I think you have it in you. Find Joe tomorrow and give him an aligazam. It may take a while before he can speak to you away from the marks, but just hold tight."

And he stood back up and sauntered away. I watched him as he walked away having destroyed my dreams for the day. I tried to make sense of the things he told me, but the words had no meaning to me. Aligazam, gazooney, scratch... It was as if he was speaking gibberish.

I didn't mean for it to get to me, but when I turned around Smiley could see the distress on my face. He walked over to me and laid a hand on my shoulder. "Don't worry. These carnny people have their own way of talking. Kind of like tut in my neighborhood. If anyone we don't trust is around we only speak in tut. Gugeetut eyetut?"

I looked up into his eyes pleading for something to make sense, but he was speaking in sentences that didn't make sense to me either.

He read the anguish on my face, "He was speaking in some kind of code. He said, 'when you find Joe give him an aligazam'. So, when you find this Joe Johnson guy, say aligazam."

When you look back at life it is funny to realize what you are grateful for and what you let slip by. If it weren't for Smiley and that reassurance, I don't know that my life would have turned out the way it did. I wish I had the opportunity to thank that man. In the short period of time I knew him he may have helped me more than anyone else I've ever known.

The next day it took me a while to find my way to the carnival. I sat on Smiley's porch until the sun rose, but when he emerged he explained to me that since the fair had started there wasn't any more work for the locals. He said they wouldn't be back over there until it was time to shut down and it was time to reload the train.

I spent most of that morning back in downtown, checking out of my room and saying goodbye to the few people that I met over the last

week. With no horse and no friends, I had to make the walk back to the fair park area. By the time I had everything wrapped up it was afternoon and I was starving. I ended up with some of the best chili I would ever taste.

I finally made my way over to the dining tent where Joe was supposed to be. And very similar to how Andrew Slate had done it, Joe Johnson was standing in the center of a small dirt circle with just over a dozen boys and young men surrounding him. Joe was a tree of a man. He wasn't quite six feet tall, but appeared to be as wide as a wardrobe. He had thick arms and legs that plainly were not made of fat. His abdominals were not well defined, but as he stood there shirtless in boots and a pair of jeans there was no doubt that there was too much man to be trifled with.

He saw me as I walked up behind a group of boys. He peered at me with an odd charm. His hair was jet black and slicked backwards. He had a large nose and ears that seemed appropriate near his sunken in eyes. He kicked a bit of dust towards me causing the boys in front to move to the side opening up a walkway for me.

His voice boomed when he called out to me, "Fifty green backs says you can't stay in this circle with me for more than one minute. It'll only cost you a buck."

I recognized the gimmick from when I met Andrew "the farmer", but I couldn't get caught up in the carnival act. I took a deep breath to build my confidence taking in the aromas of the food and animals that plagued the carnival. "Aligazam." I said the word as slowly and carefully as possible. After I felt I had stated it correctly I stood as tall as I could and lifted my chin.

Joe looked perplexed. He glanced at the boys surrounding him, a quick glance to the left followed by one to the right. Then with one eyebrow cocked he responded, "Trazyeazing teazo bleazo meazy ceazoveazer?"

I stood as tall as I could and slowly nodded my head having no idea what in the world he said to me. But, after a few second of me trying

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to hold my ground Joe spat in the dirt and returned his focus on the people around him.

A kid in his early twenties, probably older than Joe himself, stepped up. The thin frame and gangly limbs showed he would be no match. After he handed over a dollar he lunged at Joe Johnson who sidestepped the boy but put out his arm as the kid passed him. He wrapped that arm around the boy's neck and brought his other arm in behind.

People in the crowd started laughing and yelling, "Told you he was named The Strangler!"

Joe then started spinning in circles until the boy's feet were flapping in the air in front of him, then Joe let loose and the boy went careening out of the dirt circle.

I watched him beat another dozen young men that day as I waited for a chance to talk with him. It eventually came, but when the crowds had left and Joe was alone with me all he said before he went into the dining tent was "Don't say things when you don't know what they mean." After that he was gone for the day and I had nothing to show for it.

I spent that night sleeping between a couple tents back in the corner of the fair. The number of carnival workers that were passed out around the premises made it easy for me to blend in. There was no one to verify that you were a part of the carnival, no one to usher out any guests that overstayed their welcome. Instead it was a situation where if you didn't bother anyone, they didn't bother you. It was an oddly lonely and welcoming environment, but I still slept with my money in my shoe to be sure no would come by and leave me penniless.

The next two days I stood by the ring that Joe was throwing boys out of. I think I was too intimidated by the man to interrupt his show and each day he would grunt at me and walk off. Then I would spend the night somewhere on the fairgrounds trying to build up the courage to make the man talk to me.

The last day of the carnival I got to Joe early, there was only one man standing there talking to him. I knew that my future depended on Joe

Johnson talking to me and helping me to become a grappler. I had spent the last sixty hours fretting over what would happen if the carnival left and I was alone in Dallas. My entire future depended on me finding a wrestler to mentor me.

Completely fed up with my situation I walked straight up to Joe and handed him a dollar.

He looked down at it with the intense stare that always accompanied his deep set dark eyes. “Really?” His deep voice lifted in a comical fashion.

“I’ve been trying to speak with you all week.” I started to give him the spiel I had been practicing while I tried to sleep each night. But he grabbed both my shoulders and gave me a hefty shove sending me sailing out of his ring.

He turned his attention back to the other man before I hit the ground. “You look like a strong bloke, but I don’t think you stand a chance in this ring with me. I’ll give you fifty if you last one minute.”

I stood up, brushed myself off and walked back into the ring holding another dollar high in the air. I continued my spiel as Joe took the dollar from my hand. “I am training to be a grappler. I have taken Andrew Slate’s correspondence course.” Joe lunged at me trying to grab my shoulders again, but I ducked under his arms. As I ran around his side I grabbed his left wrist and pulled it behind his back for a hammerlock. Holding his hand up in the small of his back I started to reach for his ankle when he grabbed me with his right hand. He overpowered me and pulled me off of him.

I continued my plea as he hoisted me over one shoulder. “I am a dedicated worker and looking to find a mentor.” He tossed me through the air and back into the dirt outside the ring.

I returned with another dollar, then another and another. I spent somewhere near thirty dollars trying to force the man to hear me out. Near the end when I was knocked silly Joe had me over his shoulder, but before he threw me back out into the dirt he whispered in my ear. “Let me take

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some money from the rest of these marks. I will talk to you tonight, Radisson vouched for you.”

When I hit the ground that time I didn't get up. It wasn't because I was hurt or too exhausted. I stayed down out of celebration. I was finally getting the one on one I had so desperately wanted over the last few days.

Joe beat up on countless men again that day. He never had to payout the money for anyone lasting in the ring with him. After everything was over he picked me up and threw me over his shoulder again. He took me into the catering tent where we had some dinner and discussed wrestling.

I told of my training and how I had run away from home with a stolen horse. I talked about my dreams of being a grappler and traveling the world performing for crowds.

Joe thought it was all very cute but misguided. He told me he would be happy to let me in on his show, but I wasn't going to live the fantasy I had created for myself. He told me life would be full of swindling people for a buck and a life that smelled like horse manure. He offered to show me the ropes and find a place in his act for me.

I chose to ignore the less than stellar review of carnival life and take him up on his offer to travel and help out. There was no convincing me it wasn't going to be the perfect life. I was signed on for my dreams no matter how unlikely they were.

Within twenty-four hours we were on the rails headed towards California. As far as I could tell my journey had begun.

Life is a Scam

Train rides are a strange experience. Commuter trains and normal passenger trains are probably fine, but when you are traveling with a carnival in boxcars it is far from the luxury component you get along with your paid ticket.

In my experience you are confined to a single boxcar, probably half filled with some sort of supplies, animals if you are particularly unlucky. The only light is what comes in through the cracks around the door or holes in the walls. When it is cold outside it is cold inside, when it is hot outside it is hot inside. You carry the food you will need on the trip and deal with the load clacking of the tracks.

I would later learn that some of the workers would pay to have nicer cars with rooms and beds, but that came at a premium that most wrestlers wouldn't be interested in paying for.

The route we were on would take us to El Paso for the first weekend of August. Then straight to San Diego where we would spend another weekend. After that we would go north to Los Angeles. There would be a week off then a few weeks doing business in the big city. Half

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way through September we would head up to San Francisco and spend a few weeks there. The last stop would be Seattle in October.

The first leg was by far the worst. Getting locked into a boxcar with a bit of food and water and a dozen men was terrifying. If you ever need to know if you are claustrophobic, a boxcar for thirty hours will clue you in.

That first leg of the trip Joe talked my ear off. I learned nearly everything there was to know about how to be a strongman at a carnival.

“Alright Squirt. My job at the fair is to push men out of the dirt ring that I stand in. I charge everyone a dollar and promise them fifty if they can stay in the ring for more than a minute with me. So it is very important that I stay strong. I can't let my muscles wither. Because even though I prefer to grapple, if someone lasts twenty or thirty seconds I better pick that man up and toss him because fifty dollars is two days of earnings for me and Timmy.” Joe waved his hand at one of the random men in the car with us as his way of introducing Timmy Sampson to me.

Before he could continue, I piped up, “Hold your horses. Is Timmy another strongman?”

Timmy walked up behind me putting a hand on my shoulder. Seeing him in the random flashes of sunlight he looked like a very fit and toned man, but no strongman like Joe. Timmy was tall and slender with a mess of curly black hair. But, he just wasn't as intimidating as Joe.

Billy looked down at me, “I am Joe's manager. I keep him employed, negotiate his contracts and pay. When the showman tries to clip our pay I step in. If this big lug did he would hit that little rat man and end up unemployed if not in jail.”

Joe jumped back in the conversation. “He also watches for hookers.” My face refused to hide my ignorance about hookers. “It's another wrestler that shows up to get an easy fifty bucks. Or maybe to hurt the strongman for coming into their territory without notice.”

“Who's going to hurt you?” I was flabbergasted since I had never seen someone as tough as Joe.

Timmy chuckled as he responded for Joe. “I just sit in the back, nearby somewhere that I can keep a look out for someone that looks tough. I have been around the circuit a few times and I know most of the grapplers, so I would most likely notice them.”

The conversation then turned to how the wrestling world worked. Back then there was no television or radio, there was silent films, books, newspapers, some sports... As far as entertainment went there weren't that many things that were vying for the average joe's dollar. Live wrestling was one of the few things that lived off people spending their hard earned money on entertainment.

A wrestling match involved two grapplers and a promoter who would book the venue, get the equipment, get concessions, and promote the event. Because of this he would get the majority of the revenue. He would often split the rest between the wrestlers.

Promoters typically had sort of a stranglehold on specific town or area. That was considered their territory where anyone putting on a show should be doing it through that promoter. Sometimes when people were in town encroaching on their money they would send out a guy to rough up the group that was stealing his money. These territories in those early days were not well defined and rarely would remain under a single promoter for more than a year or so, but it was something that had to be understood as a possible danger.

Currently the biggest wrestler in the world was Fred Gottlieb. He was the World Champion and claimed a zero loss record. I had heard stories of his match with Gavrie Stepanchikov just a couple years before and I had played the match in my head over and over since.

In the deal with Radisson Timmy and Joe would get forty percent of what they brought in and Radisson would get the rest. Since Radisson had somewhat hoisted me on them, he upped their take to fifty percent although for the first season at the carnival I would only see half that increase.

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They laid out how the carnival worked. It was largely a series of shows and games that were designed to get the patrons to hand over their money one coin at a time. The midway games were very hard to win, the shows were advertised to be sensational, and as far as the strongman gimmick was concerned, he played on men's emotional attachment to their masculinity to coax them into the ring with him.

They explained how they saw me helping out. My job was to find marks. A mark was a person that was willing to part with their money because they either were gullible or believed they could win it back. Rather than sit in the back of the carnival with Joe and Timmy, my job would be to walk the midway and look for men that were spending money with reckless abandon. Some of them would be wealthy, some of them would be gullible, but I would soon find out that most of them were just drunk.

Once I found someone that I considered to be a mark I would stand near them and root them on. When they lost the game they were playing I would pat them on the back with a glove covered in soot. This would leave an actual mark letting all the carnies know that that man was a mark.

It was not what I hoped I would be doing. I wanted to learn to wrestle. I wanted to be in the spotlight, but this was my path there. Even if I wasn't going to be doing it right away, I knew in my heart that I would some day.

We spent some time on that first trip talking about the wrestling world and who we admired and who we didn't. I talked about meeting Andrew Slate and how my training had gone. Joe told me tales of his experiences. He had only been grappling for a couple years, but had stories that could have kept my attention for years. Timmy was a bit more experienced, but was a submission expert. He didn't rely on the flash, but rather a more tactical approach to wrestling.

The last few hours of the ride was spent with the entire boxcar trying to teach me carny. It was the strange code that all the carnival workers used to communicate in front of guests.

The idea was simple. You would say everything as usual, but add the sound eaz before each vowel. But, it took hours because Timmy and I were the only ones that knew how to read. The boxcar full of men tried to explain this to me without knowing what a vowel was. Timmy laughed in the corner and refused to help.

“Just talk like normal but say eaz before the oohs and aahs.” One man tried to explain.

“Right, go with an eaz when you don’t use your tongue except for errs and was.” Another tried to be helpful.

I eventually understood when I finally tried to translate.

“Jeazust teazalk leazike theazis.” I pieced it together as ‘just talk like this’.

I remember trying to understand Ceazoleazoreazadeazo when the train came to an abrupt stop.

Everyone jumped to their feet and stared at the door while I tried to convince my body that we were no longer moving. The vibration of the train had become so constant over the last thirty hours that the stillness felt aggressive. It was the same with the sound. Thirty hours of clanks, bangs, and wispy sounds from the wind, a quiet boxcar felt strange, it almost felt oddly loud.

Once the door slid open I heard the familiar voice of Radisson the showman barking orders for the locals to start moving tents, stakes, poles, and banners. Just before I reach down to grab some banners and join in the chaos, Timmy grabs me by the shoulder and pulled me back behind some of the cargo.

“Setting up is for suckers. We bring in too much cash to help out with setup.”

We waited in the boxcar for a half hour or so. After everyone had headed towards the location where the carnival would be set up the three of us jumped down from the train and headed towards the huge four and five story buildings of downtown El Paso.

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It was a fun time and the first time I felt I wasn't treated like a child. It was just a few men sitting around telling stories. I will never forget the Silver King Saloon. We stayed there for three days while the rest of the poor carnival folk set up the show.

I instead ate steak, learned to play darts, and even got a kiss on the cheek from a saloon girl. She landed it on my cheek after she got done dancing for Timmy, but it was one of those moments you remember forever. Probably the first time a woman made my heart race.

*El Paso to San Diego to
Los Angeles*

Trying to remember each fair now is impossible. They all kind of blend together. Again, if I had written these memoirs back in my thirties I may have stood a chance of relaying all the stories from all the towns, but in my eighties it is a different situation.

I know those first few carnivals were mostly learning how to tote the line between worker and scam artist. I remember standing on the midway watching people play games. I stood in the middle of the walkway with game tents lining the dirt path on both sides. I stared off at the men at four side to side games trying to keep straight how much each one had spent. Once I saw someone spend over a dollar at nickel game or over two dollars at a dime game I would walk over to them and pat them on the back.

The first few times I tried this I was met with anger for either breaking their focus or covering them in dirt when I tried to mark their clothes. In El Paso I ran for my safety at least a dozen times.

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Most of the midway carnies were entertained by my consistently bad attempts at finding marks. It wasn't until San Diego where a very round carny with a cauliflower ear noticed that when I tried finding marks near his game, which consisted of throwing coins at a bed of milk bottles trying to get them inside instead of between, that someone objected to my presence.

I had run three of his customers away when he screamed across the midway, "Keazid, beazee deaziscreazeet!" I stood dumbfounded staring at the man trying to translate in my head. I got as far as 'kid be' before another carny jogged over next to me. He was a short man with very tanned skin and tattoos all over his face. His dark hair, tan, and layer of dirt all blended into a sheen of filth.

The strange tattooed carny whispered to me pointing down the path of the midway. "Watch Sara Bell over there. It is about befriending them rather than ambushing them."

I had trouble getting past the thick musky odor of the man, but I peered down the dirt walk following his outstretched finger to find a middle aged woman that didn't look anything like a carny. She wore a full length blue dress with white lace gloves and a large hat that was adorned with a full bouquet of flowers.

I walked over and watched the woman. She slowly walked down the walkway between the stalls looking back and forth at the games being played. After a few minutes she walked up to a booth that had a man throwing balls at baskets nailed to a wall. When he got close to keeping the ball in the basket she would cheer in excitement. After a few minutes the man started making conversation with her and before long she was standing right next to him rooting him on. When the man missed his target for the tenth time she reached behind her and dabbed her pinky in a small jar of ink that was tied to her waist. Then patted the man on the back telling him she thought he had it that time leaving a few green dots near the man's collar on his back.

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I watched her do this three or four times always making conversation, then giving them a pat on the back of encouragement always leaving a few dots that were only noticeable if you were looking for them. After I thought I had it I caught her eye and yelled out, “Ceazan weazee teazalk?” It was the first carny speak I tried. It came out so slow and broken that I don’t think she had any chance of understanding me. But, she heard my pitiful attempt at the code language and she quickly came to me.

“Neazot heazere.” She scolded me and turned back to her job.

I went back to my area and tried her tactic. I sat in between a couple of the tents and watched for someone to overspend on one of the games. I saw a woman spending money with no abandon. I spent some time with her, talked to her and even was able to smear some black ash on the back of her shirt. I was so proud of myself when she didn’t react like I was scamming her.

I continued the process with everyone I saw overspending on the games. By the end of the day I found at least thirteen marks. I walked back to the catering tent expecting huge congratulations from Joe and Timmy, but I was instead greeted with both men scowling at me like I had broken a window.

“What the hell were you doing today?” Timmy nearly screamed at me.

“I was marking marks like I am supposed to!” I was fighting back. I had spent all day accomplishing my goals and I wasn’t about to let these two take it away from me.

Joe kneeled down so he was face to face with me. “I saw someone walk by my ring today. They had a black mark on the back of their shirt, they looked a bit small, but thought they must just be self-absorbed. I grabbed the gentleman by his shoulder and spun him around to give him my spiel. I only got ‘fella, want to see if you can last sixty seconds with...’ and I stopped when I realized I had just grabbed a woman. Luckily she thought it was funny and didn’t go get the coppers. Later another mark

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walked by that was an old man, probably in his eighties! These aren't the marks we are looking for! Who are you marking?"

I started to cower a bit and sheepishly replied, "Anyone who is spending a lot of money."

Timmy jumped in the conversation, "You are looking for people that are spending a lot of money that look like someone who would challenge Joe. You work with us, not the rest of these carnies. Everyone knows that marks who are marked with black are for the strongman. Green is for the girly shows, red is for the food vendors, and blue is for games."

They were upset with me all the way until we got to Los Angeles. On the first day of the Los Angeles stop I found the woman who had inadvertently shown me how to mark people. Before the crowds had been let in I found her coming out of one of the costume tents. She had yet to put on her makeup or wig and realized that she wasn't a woman at all. She was a man with very effeminate features. I would later learn that he was our bearded lady in the northeast, but that show didn't sell well in the west, so he found marks on that side of the country.

I approached him with the plan to scold him for not taking two seconds to talk to me, but the revelation that I had just discovered a cross dresser shocked me. In those days it wasn't something that was even discussed, it was so far from the norm that I really didn't know how to react to the person.

Standing there in shock I could hear the first wave of people coming from the street. The carnival had opened and the day was beginning. The murmurs of people started to grow, the smell of fry oil began to waft through the air. I started looking for people spending money when I heard a bit of yelling from the front gate.

As I walked in that direction I heard deep voices, "Where's your strong man?"

I quickly realized that they were probably hookers sent by the local promoter. I ran back through the midway, round the corner of the girly

shows, past the freak shows, and back by catering where Joe stood in his dirt circle waiting to challenge anyone who dared step in the ring with him.

“There are some men here.” I paused panting from my sprint. “I think they are hookers.”

Joe’s demeanor grew a little darker. His fake scowl left his face and he donned a serious look that I had yet to see on him. He started stretching his arms in front of his chest as he yelled into the catering tent, “Timmy! I need you to go scout. Squirt thinks there are hookers here.”

Timmy ran out of the tent and past us as I screamed, “They were at the gate.”

It wasn’t long before there was a crowd around the ring and the normal trash talk was being thrown at Joe. Each time he faced a man he would look at him with a lot of care to determine if that was the man who was there to take him out.

He went through five men with ease before a group of men approached. The lead man was about the size of Joe, burly strong man that was obviously not your average customer. He was flanked by a tall lanky man to his right who wore a strange headgear giving him I could only express as donut ears. On his left was another huge man, but much older. Someone who was probably very formidable in his day.

Timmy came up behind them and shouted, “It’s on the level. Negotiate it!”

As they walked up Joe looked at the old man and said, “Billy Mulders, the solid man.” Joe recognized the man as one of the greatest grapplers of the 1800s. “Don’t tell me you are going to step in this ring. I respect you, but I will take you out if you make me.”

Billy smiled the smile of an old man who still has some tricks up his sleeve. “I don’t expect to compete with someone with meat hooks like those. But I have someone who wants to take part of your house. This is Frank Bell.” Billy motioned to the man in the center.

The large younger man stepped forward looking eye to eye with Joe and growled, “I am going murder you.”

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Joe responded, "Did you bring a gun? You going to shoot me? Because I am pretty quick. I can help you learn to draw your gun better."

Frank backed up a few feet, "You think you can draw better than us? I'd love to see that. But I'm not going to shoot you. I am going to work you until you learn who runs this place. Learn that we're standing over his territory."

Joe prepared himself for the conflict. He lowered into a stance where he could grapple, "Let's do this job. You have a screw loose in your head if you think I am finished. Then you can let that funny faced man know that my heat is going to hotshot him to be able to draw."

Timmy pushed his way through the crowd until he reached the circle. He patted down both men to see if they had any weapons. He explained that he is looking for one fall or submission.

Then the two men barreled towards each other slamming together in a collar and elbow tie up that left an echoing slap through the edge of the fair. Joe leapt up and wrapped his arms around Frank's head creating a headlock that forced the man to bend at the waist. Frank tried to push out of the hold, but Joe was locked in with his feet dug into the dirt. Frank then squatted down and lifted Joe in the air. The sensation shocked Joe as he was too large for most people to lift. He released the headlock and pushed himself forward but as he landed on the ground Frank grabbed Joe's right hand and bent it backwards while twisting his thumb around the back of his hand.

Timmy immediately started screaming, "That's it. Frank Bell is disqualified for using an illegal thumb lock."

Joe raised both his hands in the air and grunted in accomplishment similar to a gorilla. While Frank stared back with incredulity.

The lanky man with the donut apparatus on his head stepped into the ring. "That move isn't illegal!"

Joe screamed back, "We never allow toe or finger locks."

"Well here in California they are legal."

"And who do you think you are?"

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“I am Dr. Jesse Steamer. The Pacific Coast Champion.” He took a few steps and stood up to Joe, nearly nose to nose if Jesse wasn’t so tall. “And I want you out of California.” When the words came out the crowd let out an ‘ooo’.

“You are going to have to make me.” Joe took two steps back and spit in the man’s face.

Dr. Jesse Steamer wiped the saliva off his eye, “I will be back here Sunday. And when I am done you will never step in California again.”

Joe laughed a maniacal laugh and responded, “No, when I am done I will take your Pacific Coast Title and leave you in retirement.”

The Job

Joe continued to have his normal scam as the week went on, but Timmy and I were suddenly refocused on promoting Steamer Vs. Johnson. Joe was left to his own devices on making as much money as he could by tossing around the locals in that small dirt ring while I was learning the ropes of promoting a show.

At the time I didn't understand what we were doing, but now in hindsight it is the same thing that professional wrestling does today. It is the same thing the movie industry does with trailers or television with commercials.

Leaving the site of the carnival Timmy and I went to downtown where he showed me how to spread rumors. It largely consisted of going to saloons and talking about wrestling and boxing matches. We would talk about Gottlieb versus Stepanchikov from a few years back and whether Stepanchikov would ever get a rematch. We would talk the boxing match between Johnson and Jeffries. But the moment Timmy realized that someone at a nearby table was listening he would start talking about Dr. Jesse Steamer the Pacific Coast Champion and his opponent from over in the east. Then he would go into great detail about Joe Johnson and how

he has been traveling the country looking for a great opponent. He told me stories of him serving years in prison for strangling men to their deaths in the ring giving him his nickname, The Strangler. And every time we did this, someone would come over to us and ask where the fight was going to be.

By the end of the week he had every bar tender within two miles of the fairgrounds talking up the fight. He stopped by the L.A. Times office and talked up the match to their sports reporters. Before you knew it the match was promoted in the paper both the early and late editions.

This idea of promotion is something that I ended up making a living on years later. The idea is that you present a story with no definite ending in such a cliffhanger fashion that everyone must know what is going to happen. In the sense of good versus evil Timmy was setting up the story of the local hero that is stepping up to the challenge of foreign brute that threatens to murder their hero.

I was still so enthralled with being on the road and somewhat involved with grappling, although involved might be a vast overstatement, that I didn't understand what Timmy was doing. I didn't see that Joe was being set up as a villain. I didn't see that he was pushing the locals to put pride in their local champion.

I was excited to see a real match with two wrestlers. I couldn't wait for Joe to prove how much better he was than this skinny doctor. But, it was my childish infatuation with the show. I wasn't yet smartened up to what the professional wrestling world really was.

I remember the day my perfect vision of professional wrestling died. Some might say that it was a shame that I had left home and set out on a life in this fictional world, but I think it is a blessing. If I had that heart wrenching moment before I vowed to become a grappler, I never would have left. I would have spent my life in Texas learning to be a cattle rancher. I wouldn't have had any adventure in my life and I wouldn't have learned how great it is to love what you do.

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The day my fantasy world of wrestling died was that Sunday. Dr. Jesse Steamer and Joe Johnson were prepared to put on the fight of the century as far as Los Angeles wrestling was concerned. The plan was to charge a dollar a head, but once the crowds started gathering Radisson realized that he had a sold out fight on his hands.

He knew his tent held three hundred people and he could see there were easily five hundred who showed up. When we were within an hour of the fight Radisson took to his podium in front of the tent flap and announced it was three dollars a head. And started to take money. Both Timmy and Billy Mulders were there counting heads as they entered the tent. Radisson had promised fifty percent of the gate to the winner as a fighter's purse. Billy and Timmy were going to be sure that it was an actual fifty percent.

I ran around back of the tent, winded between random tents and stalls until I found the costuming tents where Joe was preparing for his match. I intended to inform him that the price per ticket was three dollars and we may be in for much more than the hundred bucks we were hoping for.

When I slid into the tent moving way faster than I should've been. I slid across the dirt almost slamming into Joe. He was sitting down having a drink of rum. The image always stood out in my mind as funny. There is something about an oversized super muscular man sitting in a small metal chair that made it look like he was playing some kind of dress up game. Almost like a little girl playing princess.

"The crowd is huge. And Radisson upped the ticket price to three." I stopped mid-sentence when I realized a couple feet to my left was Dr. Jesse Steamer and Frank Bell also seated having a drink of rum.

I thought it was an ambush, they were going to take out Joe before the match. I walked backwards slowly trying to figure out who to call for. As I did Frank jumped to his feet nearly spilling his drink, pointing at Joe.

Joe waved his hand and shook his head, “Don’t worry about him. He is a part of my crew.” He turned to me without a care in the world, “Thanks Squirt hopefully Timmy is keeping track of the headcount.”

I didn’t know what to think. These men were supposed to be at each other’s throats. They were supposed to be enemies. They were supposed to be ready to take one another out. I shook my head in confirmation of Timmy keeping track of the crowd.

“Good. Head back out there. We have to clear up a few loose ends before the match.” And with that Joe turned back to his rivals and continued to drink his rum.

I stumbled out of the tent in a daze. It didn’t leave me for weeks. I walked back to the big tent without really understanding what was happening but knowing that it wasn’t right. I tried to reason out what I saw, why they would be friendly and what they had to discuss. I ended up standing between the bleachers next to Timmy when the fight started.

I looked up at Timmy who was jotting down numbers on the back of a torn poster. He was calculating his take of the gate. Then I looked out and watch the match. It started as I thought with a collar and elbow tie up. But, when Joe should have easily overpowered the much weaker doctor he instead took a step to the left throwing him off balance.

I had watched Joe take on men of all shapes and sizes and had never seen him side step during a lockup.

Then Dr. Steamer followed up with an Indian death lock which wrapped Joe’s legs into a small triangle held down by the doctor’s full body weight.

Joe overpowered the moved and sent Jess flying. I felt my heart lift a bit, but when Joe lunged back at the doctor reaching with both hands for his neck I knew that he was playing a character. He was trying to be The Strangler and convince all the people in the audience that he was going to strangle his opponent, their hero, the Pacific Coast Champion.

I didn’t watch the rest of the fight with my mind. I saw it with my eyes, but my dreams were so perfectly shattered that none of it entered my

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memory bank. I have no memory of what the end of that match looked like. All I know is what I knew then, Joe Johnson was taking a fall and losing to Dr. Jesse Steamer.

Kayfabe

The rest of the Los Angeles trip I spent sulking in darkened corners. I not only felt that I couldn't trust a man who I thought was my mentor, I also could no longer know how much I knew about the sport I had upended my life to become a part of.

I didn't speak to Joe for at least a week. When we left Los Angeles and headed up to San Francisco I hitched a ride in a boxcar that some of the freak show performers rode in. I remember the last of the tent poles being loaded into the rear cars and walking up the side of the train. I had my head down and eyes red from crying over my lost future. The glow of the moon gave the long train a gentle hue almost as if it was meant to be painted and hung in a doctor's office somewhere.

I looked up seeing Timmy a couple boxcars up from me jumping up to the open door, trying to crawl in with his legs dangling in the air. Once he got in he leaned out the door and motioned for me.

Even the hint of communication angered me. I spat in the dirt and turned to the boxcar I was in front of. I would get in there without them. I grabbed the vertical metal pole and used it to walk my feet up the side of the cars wall. I swung into the room taking in my quarters for the next

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twenty-four hours. It wasn't any different than the other cars. Instead of the boxes we normally contended with this car housed a bunch of animal feed and hay.

I found myself a corner that no one was utilizing and sat down with my knees in my chest ready to pout my entire future away. After a few minutes the door slid shut, the train started to roll down the tracks. The whir of the wind and the constant clank of the rails let the world slip away and I slept for a good portion of the trip.

Daylight crept in through the wooden walls when I was awoken by the effeminate man that had shown me how to talk to the carnival goers without tipping them off to my scam. He was tapping me on the knee, "What are you doing on this car?" The voice being much more manly than I had heard from him before took me off-guard. "Aren't you usually with the muscle heads?" He asked about Joe and Timmy as I came to reality.

"I don't know that I am going to be working with them anymore." I said still wallowing in my adolescent sorrow.

"Why not?" He looked at me confused as to what could have happened that I would be willing to have to find a new place in the carnival.

"I don't know that I should be spreading it, but you know that fight between Joe and that doctor down in Los Angeles?"

The man laughed thinking about the match. "That was a good fight. Great show and I think everyone got their money worth." He saw my annoyed reaction to his words and didn't understand what the problem was. "You didn't like it? I can't recall a show that sent a crowd home happier."

"Really? That's all that matters? That the crowd was happy that some weak looking local wrestler took out Joe Johnson. You realize that there was no way that man could have overpowered Joe in the way it happened."

"Of course not." The man paused when he realized what was happening. He motioned for a few more men to come over to us.

As the men I knew as the sword swallower and the fire breather came over he asked, "How long you been on the road with us?"

"It's over a month now." I relaxed a little knowing that I was being asked about myself.

"And why did you join a circus?"

"I was training to be a wrestler, but there was no way for me to do that in Texas. I thought I could join Joe and learn the ropes."

The three men whispered to each other trying to figure out how to explain to me that my dream was truly that, wrestling wasn't what I thought it was. After a few seconds the bearded lady turned back towards me.

"The thing about the carnival is it is a show. We give people experiences they couldn't otherwise have. You must have noticed. I am the bearded lady, but as you know I am not a woman. The world's smallest horse is just a young donkey. The games are only winnable when we want them to be. And current wrestling is kind of born out of the carnival. That isn't to say that Joe isn't strong and a talented grappler, but he is a showman first and foremost."

"But why didn't he fight him? He could have won. Why did he throw the fight?" My heart was ravaged and there was no resolve for me. I didn't want to listen, but what I was hearing actually did make some sense to me.

"Maybe he could have. But maybe that man knew a hold Joe didn't. Maybe he could have been hurt. Maybe the crowd would have come to his aid. Maybe the best idea was to send everyone home happy." As soon as the bearded lady finished with his speech the fire breather leaned over and patted me on the shoulder. He nodded at me as if to say that everything will work out. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a flask and handed it to me. With that the men left me to think.

I nursed the tequila that was in the flask. I didn't want it, I didn't like it, but I knew that men often drank to deal with heartbreak and loss so I assumed it was the proper thing to do. Looking back at that moment I want to be mad at the fire breather because I didn't need to be given a

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vice so young, but it was a different time. I was on the road alone with no family. I kind of understand why he thought I could use the drink.

When we arrived in San Francisco I could feel the intoxication. I got off the train with a mission to get answers from Joe and Timmy. I hopped down from the boxcar spilling into the loose gravel below before the train had come to a full stop.

I gathered myself in the cool breeze of the late day in northern California and headed towards the car that Joe and Timmy were in. As soon as the door slid open I was crawling in. I knew that the men I was looking for weren't going to be quick off the train. They had no intentions of helping with the assembly of the carnival if they didn't have to.

I walked past all the carnies jumping off to help and found Joe and Timmy in the back corner sprawled out trying to go unnoticed. I stood over the two of them and blurted out my accusation. "You threw that fight!" I shouted it but both men looked up at me in confusion. It was almost as if they were agreeing with me. I shook my head trying to shake reality into my vision. "Why?"

Timmy sat up with a puzzled look on his face. "You realize that we made more money with splitting it with Jesse's crew than we would have otherwise. You understand that we were in his territory and he was kind of doing us a favor by promoting a show with us? And have you stopped to think how little it matters if Joe loses a match on the west coast?"

I wanted to respond. I wanted to argue, but I was a child that was a bit tipsy arguing a reality I didn't understand with an adult. I wasn't going to win this fight and I knew it.

Most of the San Francisco stop was spent teaching me about the wrestling industry and kayfabe. Which is the name that was used for how people in the wrestling industry keep the fact that it the contests aren't always legitimate a secret.

I came to find out that much like carnies speak carny, wrestlers have a whole vernacular they use to communicate to one another while

people are around. And the shouting match that Joe had before his impromptu match with Frank Bell was actually the two of them figuring out what the plan was.

I learned a bunch of words that day. Stuff that eventually would get out in the public like face means good guy, heel means bad guy, gimmick is the term used for someone's character. But there were certain words that clued me into the conversation I heard days before. I was told that house is the money gained from gate attendance of a fight. A shoot is a legitimate fight while a work is a predetermined fight. Draw meant how many people someone could get to show up to a fight. Screw job was a finish to fight that ended where someone was cheated out of their victory. And a hotshot was a short term story line that would end in a big money match.

Going back over the shouting match in my head I started to translate it.

Billy Mulders had said, "I don't expect to compete with someone with meat hooks like those. But I have someone who wants to take part of your house. This is Frank Bell." Meaning they wanted some of the money we were making.

Joe responded with, "Did you bring a gun? You going to shoot me? Because I am pretty quick. I can help you learn to draw your gun better." He was asking if they were going to try and legitimately fight him or hurt him because he could bring a large crowd if they wanted to work together.

Frank Bell jumped in and said, "You think you can draw better than us? I'd love to see that. But I'm not going to shoot you. I am going to work you until you learn who runs this place. Learn that we standing over his territory." Basically saying he wasn't going to hurt Joe, but they needed to have a rigged match because they needed to defend their territory.

Joe ended the conversation with, "Let's do this job. You have a screw loose in your head if you think I am finished. Then you can let that

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funny faced man know that my heat is going to hotshot him to be able to draw.” He told Frank that they would have a screw job finish, Frank being cheated out of the win, and they would use it to set up a big money match for whatever good guy they wanted to promote.

Going through it line by line in my head opened my eyes to a whole new world. I was hooked although I wouldn't admit it. I was holding a grudge and continued to do so for a few months. But, it all was coming full circle. Even though I had trained to become a competitive grappler I had trained with a friend. We would put holds on each other and try different reversal all with the intent of not actually hurting one another. I had inadvertently prepared for professional wrestling.

In San Francisco and Seattle Joe let me train a bit with him. Anytime the locals weren't ponying up the money I would pretend to be one of them and take on Joe. Of course Joe was teaching me things by whispering in my ear between grunts letting me know what to do next. He would put me in a standing arm bar, scream with aggression then whisper to me to do a front somersault and kick him in the elbow in the process.

I learned a bunch of short combination moves that made things interesting for the crowds. I of course was always thrown out of the circle to keep things believable.

I also held onto that flask from that point forward. It helped me keep a positive attitude about the choices I made. It was also a habit that was quickly forming largely due to me wrestling more and my body hurting. I don't care how many times someone tells you wrestling is fake, it hurts like hell.

We finished the carnival in Seattle sometime in November. The show was heading down to Mexico for the winter, but Timmy, Joe and myself would leave them for a few months looking to reunite sometime in the spring. It was partially to have some time off, an off season if you will, but also because there were different laws and customs in Mexico. Being a strongman and beating up locals didn't always bode well for foreigners passing through.

We said our goodbyes to the people we knew and snuck onto a freight car in the middle of the night that was headed east. Joe and I were headed to Colorado where Joe spent his winters. Timmy would keep on going down to Little Rock, Arkansas.

Hopping a freight train illegally is quite a different experience than riding in circus cars. For one there aren't a bunch of people in your car so any warmth you were expecting while whizzing down the tracks at thirty miles an hour isn't there. There was a tough guy persona that came along with being a wrestler, but on a cold November night in a freight car you huddle up with whatever warm body you can.

The other major difference in a freight car is they aren't built for passengers. The car we were in in November of 1910 was designed to hold large crates that were eight to ten feet wide. So the floor didn't need to be solid, we were riding on floor planks that had a foot or so gap between each one. It was one of the worst traveling experiences I've ever had, freezing and trying not to fall out of the train and die under its wheels.

It was five or six days of hopping between trains. We had to jump and roll out of a couple trains while they were moving because we were coming into a station in the daylight where we would likely be caught and arrested for freight hopping.

Eventually we got to Denver. Which was a much bigger city than I expected. It wasn't Los Angeles or San Francisco, but it was definitely bigger than Dallas. We had amassed a decent amount of money so I felt that we could get through the winter without too much suffering.

What I hadn't realized was Joe had a deal with the owner of Union Saloon. He had room and board for the winter and just had to provide security for the saloon in case anyone got handsy with the saloon girls or thought it was a good place to steal some cash.

I spent most of that winter helping out the saloon girls by making conversation with the men and tipping the girls off as to who had more money, who was married, who was more than drunk...

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Joe had a couple of wrestling matches that winter. The Orpheum theatre was a just a few blocks away and they occasionally booked matches. Those matches were all legitimate contests. Joe came out on top of both of them, but it made me realize the difference between what he and Jesse Steamer did and these legitimate grappling bouts.

I watched on in excited anticipation when he entered the ring with some local collegiate wrestler, but instead of the loud noises and quick throws that came from collar and elbow tie ups, they instead spent most their time on all fours holding onto one another. I remember getting bored during one bout because Joe had his opponents leg in a bear hug but anytime he tried to move to put pressure on the joint the man would reach back and try and tie up Joe's shoulder. It was slow, there wasn't much else to say about it.

That was a great off season. I learned a lot, I drank a lot, I saw real snow for the first time, and I started to realize that maybe the fantasy I had about wrestling wasn't all about the competition.

April 1911

After the winter we did some freight hopping and headed out to Arkansas where we would meet up with Timmy and the carnival. Riding the rails illegally in the spring was a different story. You don't have to worry about the bitter cold and keep a closer eye on whoever it is that might be upset we were jumping aboard a train with no ticket.

I remember that specific ride because we jumped on a logging train. We rode in a car with an open roof and we were settled on top of a car full of tree trunks or logs or cabers, I never learned the difference. It was a single shot trip that took a day and a half.

This was the first time I really got to see some of the country side. Of course leaving out of Denver and heading east is nothing but prairies and rolling hills where you are lucky. But it didn't matter, I had never seen so much expanse before.

The plains of Kansas and Oklahoma, which most people still thought of as Indian territory, eventually broke to the lush greenery of the Oklahoma and Arkansas forests. Although enthralled by the scenery I remember feeling the need to keep an eye out in the Muskogee and Choctaw areas. But as the Ozarks came into view from the north we pulled

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into Little Rock. There was no stop as the train was heading straight through. Unlike before where we jumped from a moving train and rolled in the dirt, we had to exit this train from the top since we were so high up.

Joe showed me how to execute a jump from the top of the freight car to a railroad water tower. It is the same concept as the jump and roll except this time you are thirty feet over the ground and risk a lot more injury if you mess it up.

That season I spent a lot more time working with Joe rather than looking for marks. I learned a lot from the match with Dr. Jesse Steamer the season before and started to come up with ideas as to why someone would want to come see Joe. I tried spreading rumors about someone beating him trying to make the scam seem more possible. I tried talking about his strangler nickname. I tried all kinds of things and found that I could contribute more marks by getting them to come to Joe than to try and mark them so Joe could coax them over.

Everything kind of fell into line that year. I was learning more and more about grappling and the business of running shows. Joe, Timmy, and myself were getting along better and better each day.

But, I was also thirteen. Which meant I was more argumentative as well as going through the peak of puberty. It didn't take long before my coworkers started noticing me staring at the girls more and more often.

We went from Little Rock to Atlanta to Charlotte and the bearded lady caught my eye more than once which I quickly tried to cover up the fact that it happened. For no reason other than keeping the teasing down I found myself wishing there were no cross dressers at work.

I also didn't go far without my flask. Over the course of six months I had taken my need for that flask from an emotional aide to a full-fledged habit. I developed a taste for tequila, whiskey, rum, vodka. I was on my way to appreciating anything alcoholic. Soon I would be introduced to back country moonshine.

Timmy and Joe got a kick out of my interest in the girls. I think it reminded them of being a bit younger and how naïve I probably was. They

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would egg me on to talk about the girls in the evenings. I think they felt it was somewhat of a bonding experience.

When we were in Atlanta Joe paid one of the girls to drag me into one of the strip shows they were doing. It was supposed to be a suggestive dance true to those burlesque dances you see from back in the day where a woman keeps herself covered with a feather. And it was exactly that a girl dancing around in only her nickers covering her breasts with giant feathers that would flow and give the audience the hope that they may catch a glimpse of something they weren't supposed to.

When the girls found me and dragged me into their show, not that I was kicking and screaming, they didn't set me in the audience where you were presented with the sophisticated tease. Instead they sat me in a chair off the side of the stage where the feathers didn't cover up the things you weren't meant to see. I instead got a full view of the dancers while they hid themselves from the men who paid.

I overthought it then. I thought they were trying to seduce me. I understand now that it was playful and fun. Young girls with some harmless flirtation who enjoyed watching a boy blush. I was a pretty shy kid when it came to girls and that made them all the more amused by my discomfort.

After Atlanta one of the girls found me and told me that I was riding in her car on the way to Charlotte. Timmy and Joe not only encouraged me to join the girl, they hooted and hollered like I was receiving a diploma.

Many of the train rides from that year blend together, but the ride from Atlanta to Charlotte is burned into my mind. It was a short trip only about ten hours. We left late at night probably four AM. I found the girl who was on the younger side of the carnival dancers somewhere in her early twenties probably still ten years my senior.

She was standing outside of the third freight car from the engine. She was leaning against the train smoking a cigarillo. The faint light of the

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moon painted her in a dreamy pale white. She almost seemed to shimmer in the moonlight.

I walked up to her with nerves exploding in my stomach. She cheered when she saw me walk up and threw her smoke out into the wet shrubbery of Atlanta and grabbed me by the hand. She turned and ran up the stairs to the car dragging me behind.

It was my first look at one of the cars that had beds and rooms in it. The dancers let Radisson take an extra percentage out of their pay to get the privilege of riding in a nice car. It was miles ahead of our own accommodations. First you didn't have to climb into it, there were stairs built to be able to walk into the cabin. The walls were much more solid and doubled up, the first set laid horizontally the second vertically. When the train got going, there was almost no wind inside. Once inside there were lanterns that hung from the walls and a small hallway down the center. There were eight rooms, four on each side of the hallway. The floor was carpeted with a deep red oriental rug, the walls were painted to match the rug.

The young girl led me down the hallway to her room. When she opened it up there was a small table with a mirror, a stack of blankets and three beds, mattress, frame and all.

I realized once I entered the room that she did not have a private room it was shared with two other dancers. When we entered both women raised their voices with a playful 'woo'. She sat me on her bed and told the other women about me.

"This is the boy that we drug up on stage this week. He is thirteen, a part of the strongman's group, and you should have seen how rosy his cheeks got when Ivette turned and shimmied in his direction." The girl laughed and walked over to the mirror to adjust her makeup.

One of the women walked over and sat on the bed with me. "How you doing stud?" I was starting to realize that this wasn't the exciting request that I or the other men thought it would be.

“I am ok Ma’am.” I said trying not to let my disappointment show in my voice.

The woman motioned to the girl that brought me onboard, “Eden wasn’t meaning to be mean, she just thought it would be fun to tease you. I’m sorry if she made you think otherwise.”

“I get it.” I said with my head down sulking. “I just don’t want Joe and Timmy to laugh at me.”

The girls all exploded in laughter. “Dear, as long you are a gentleman here tonight we will all support a story that will keep them from laughing at you.”

It didn’t turn out to be the night I hoped originally, I was still a virgin when I left that train car, although I wouldn’t claim such. I did however learn a lot about the women of the carnival.

Most of them were runaways from bad marriages. Some of them were gypsies that found safety in numbers. But, they all were more self-sufficient than any woman I had ever met. They did not answer to a man, they made their own money, they travelled alone, and they understood their sexuality more so than most people even fifty years later.

I learned about how they would use dancing and seduction to pull in more money than a lot of the other shows. In the same way that Joe and Steamer had created a must see match by teasing what could be, the women were running the same scam. They would wear short dresses and low cut corsets to show off their bodies out and about at the carnival, making men want to spend money to see what they could see behind the curtain.

It wasn’t anything they were ashamed of, rather they were proud of their ability to make their own way. They felt they had attained a power over men that only they could control. Something that I would find common in actresses and models later in life, they weren’t ashamed of their bodies or what they did with it, they realized it was a tool and a weapon.

*The World's Heavyweight
Champion*

Traveling with the carnival was a whirlwind of a job that went at a break back pace. Typically, we ran shows from sunrise to well after sunset every day we were in a town with the exception of a few days to put everything up. On a rare occasion we found ourselves in a city with no show. This was either because of trains running late or permits not being approved. It wasn't common because Radisson wanted to make money and days with no shows did not accomplish that goal, but in the summer of 1911 we found ourselves in New York City with a five-day break.

It was these times that I grasped how much money we were actually making. Living in freight cars and eating mostly catered food meant we rarely spent any money. Most towns we could walk away with somewhere between fifteen and twenty-five dollars apiece. That was for about a week of work. In the long run we each pulling in around six hundred dollars a year since we took five months off in the winter. Most

people in America were making a similar amount for twelve months of sixty-hour work weeks. Then on top of that we lived essentially rent free.

It was this stock pile of money that we were each building that allowed those rare days off in some American city proof that we were doing pretty well.

Over the course of my lifetime I have spent many weeks in New York City, but it was that first time that it spoke to me. The city was half built and quickly becoming the capital of everything modern in America. The streets had very few horses left. There were pedestrians everywhere, a few bicycles, and motorcars were around every corner.

The buildings stood taller than anything I had ever seen. Most streets boasted buildings with ten stories, but the Metropolitan Life Tower stood at nearly fifty stories tall and took an entire city block.

It was the time when you would see men working on girders high in the air and people dressed in the most formal of clothes down below going to fancy restaurants. People all over the city were bustling about and already taking for granted the amazing attractions they had such as the Times Herald Tower, now lovingly referred to as Times Square, Central park, the NYC subway system.

I remember stepping into the newly built Pennsylvania station and being in awe of how much elegance a public transportation depot could have. It would be two more years before Grand Central opened and really blew my mind. We did it all that week in New York. We saw Central Park, amazing historical art at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Statue of Liberty, and saw Ziegfeld Follies which had just opened at the Jardin de Paris theatre on Broadway.

No matter how much stuff there is to do in New York it isn't what made me love the city. It was the beacon of hope it provided. In most of America at the time you saw people struggling to get by. You saw people who would spend six days a week doing hard labor to have a one-day weekend with their family spent on housework, tending gardens and livestock. People fought for everything they had and barely made it.

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You knew that there were people out there who were living the dream, people who were making enough money to live comfortably and do what they please. New York City was the first place I had been that you could see it. It was all around you. The people who had figured out their world walked amongst the rest of us. I think that feeling spread across the city and everyone there was striving to achieve.

So not only did you see those who made it, you were also surrounded by those who were risking everything they had to make it as well. Everyone was working and everyone was hustling and everyone had a dream that they were determined to make reality.

The dark side of New York is those who don't make it. And that is just as obvious as the rest of it, you see those poor souls who have lost it all and are left with the clothes on their backs living on the sidewalks.

The last night in Manhattan we went to a wrestling show. In one of the theaters on Broadway that was between productions had weekly bouts between grapplers in the northeast region. It was an odd sensation watching the bout as the majority of the crowd was those sophisticated members of the Manhattan social elite. Instead of cheers and boos the room was filled with polite applause.

Although it didn't give me the adrenaline rush that I enjoyed with most live sports I was learning where the real money came from.

I don't remember the competitors. We saw two matches and neither were of any memorable note. After the second match another wrestler who I immediately recognized from newspapers came to the ring to make an announcement.

It was Fred Gottlieb the world's champion. He stood in the ring with his entourage, all of which seemed like short weaklings surrounding him. He was there to promote his rematch with Gavrie Stepanchikov in September in Chicago.

Gottlieb's controversial win over Stepanchikov had become almost legend. The idea that they would meet again meant huge money. He stood in the ring staring out at the black and white dressed audience

and spoke of how he was going to prove once and for all he is the deserving undisputed world's champion.

Joe couldn't resist the chance to corner Gottlieb and before he had a chance to finish his speech Joe was entering the ring and screaming at Fred. Timmy and I bolted from our chairs to make sure Joe didn't get mauled by the entourage of the champion.

Joe could only get about ten feet from the man before the mass of short agents and trainers got between the two wrestlers. Joe shouted out for the room to hear, "Don't give that loser another shot. You have already beaten him. Why don't you take a challenger that will give you a run for your money? Someone who could really tear the house down."

Fred rolled his eyes obviously used to every random grappler trying to get a title opportunity. "Am I to assume you are this legendary challenger?"

Joe started to respond, but Fred continued, louder drowning out my mentor, "Let me guess you are Tom Peterson master of the deadly wrist lock." He paused like he was going to let Joe respond, but he jumped back in, "No wait. You are Bjorn Bernsten the man who has mastered the fatal heart punch." He paused again, but resume with even less of a break. "Oh wait. You must be Pedro Gutierrez the mythical man of a million holds." He chuckled prompting the room of sophisticates to do the same.

As Fred turned his back to Joe making faces for the audience's amusement Joe screamed back, "No! I work under the name Joe The Strangler Johnson and I am going to rip your head off!" He lunged towards Gottlieb, but Timmy and I were easily able to hold him back. It was this point I realized he was not trying to start a fight right now, he was trying to build a desire to see a fight.

Unfortunately, Gottlieb and his associates weren't interested in promoting a match with Joe, they were focused on their bout in Chicago. Fred turned back to Joe and shouted, "I don't know who you are. No one in this audience knows who you are. This is my house and I don't share it with someone who thinks they can do this job. I don't know why you

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think you deserve a fight with me but if you aim your weapon at me I will shoot back. But, if you want to take a shot. If you want to get in line for a chance at the purse and you aren't going to run away crying when I spill your juice because you can't get the job done, then why don't you come to Chicago on September fourth? Until then get out of my ring before I call the cops." With that Fred turned back to the crowd who cheered for the champion while Timmy and I pulled Joe back out of the ring and out of the theatre.

I knew that the two of them had been communicating with Kayfabe, but I didn't know all the code words they used. I wasn't sure what was said. But, the second we got outside the theatre Joe was over the moon with excitement.

He grabbed Timmy by both shoulders and with a huge grin said, "Did you hear that? He told me to meet him in Chicago!"

Timmy was much more levelheaded and understood the entire conversation, "He also said if you don't lose he'll beat you, make you bleed, and take all the money."

Joe waved his hands in the air as if that was inconsequential. "We just have to negotiate. Not to mention, he is a lanky man, I bet I could beat him in a fair contest."

Timmy shook his head while staring down at the street, "Because Fred Gottlieb is known for having fair contests." He was right. The fight he had with Stepanchikov for the title ended with only one of three falls.

"We just have to talk to him." There was no convincing Joe otherwise. We went back to the train and let Radisson know that we were going to be taking a hiatus from the carnival. We would most likely be back after the new year. It wasn't what Radisson wanted to hear, but outside of threatening to find a new strong man there wasn't a lot he could do.

We made plans to travel to Chicago and booked a few matches in towns along the way. These were an attempt to get the idea out there that Joe was beating everyone and wanted a shot at the title.

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We ended up promoting matches in Pittsburgh, Columbus, Dayton, and Indianapolis along the way. Joe had three matches where he legitimately defeated some local grapplers, but when we got to Indianapolis there weren't any takers. So we did the next best thing and put on a couple of worked matches where Joe defeated me and then Timmy one right after the other.

It was supposed to seem like a superhuman feat to beat two men in immediate succession, but I was a small framed thirteen-year-old. No one in that building thought I stood a chance. But, this was a big moment for me. I don't think Timmy or Joe realized it, but it was my first actual wrestling match. Of course I would then be sporting a zero and one record, but the moment meant a lot to me.

I remember the announcer standing in the ring shouting over the room of cigar smoking drunk men, "From the farms of Denton, Texas. Your challenger Squirt Malone!" I was standing back in the corner of the ring taking everything in. I was nervous, my knees were weak and the crowd sounded like they were about to eat me alive. I tried to take a step forward and raise my hand like a boxer, but I looked like I was trying to silence the crowd. I wasn't received with silence, but laughter and a few pretzels thrown at me.

"And from Denver Colorado, the man who is responsible for more deaths in the ring than any other man in the world, The Strangler Joe Johnson." The ring announcer finished as Joe and I walked to the center of the ring standing just a few feet apart.

The referee went through his spiel of not cheating and motioned for the bell. I froze. I couldn't figure out what to do. Joe whispered for me to punch him. "Hit me. In the jaw and don't hold back."

I did as he said and he caught by wrist and twisted his body to drag me down into an arm bar. He walked me through the counter and as soon as I was on my feet he would twist another body part into a submission hold. It went like that for five or six minutes. Joe walked me through counter move after counter move until he was ready to pin me.

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The experience was oddly very similar to learning to grapple with Trefor a few years earlier in the barn late at night. We did move after move showing a technical prowess, but never once trying to hurt the other person. But that was the end of my first ever, actual, technically recorded wrestling bout.

After that Joe and Timmy gave the audience a solid thirty minutes of fighting with Joe emerging victorious and leaving the crowd with a hateful speech about how he was headed to Chicago to challenge Fred Gottlieb.

1911 Rematch

Early September in the windy city things were already starting to cool down. It was too early to see any changes in the leaves, but the bite of the summer sun had already been replaced by cool breezes that came in off the lake.

We arrived a few days before the fight and Joe was adamant about finding Fred and his crew to discuss the possibility of them having a match. He had built it up in his head at each stop along the way that he was promoting this supposed matchup so well that he deserved a large portion of the gate. This was being built up so much in his head that he was convinced he needed to shoot on Gottlieb and become the World Champion. It didn't matter how much Timmy and I tried to get it into his head that this is the world's champion and is quite skilled, Joe believed with all his heart that he could easily out wrestle Fred Gottlieb.

It was a good thing that we arrived so early. Gottlieb and his entourage showed up early the next day. It wasn't two hours before the streets were littered with reporters. By noon getting to speak with Gottlieb was about as easy as getting a private meeting with President Taft. Luckily,

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since we had arrived early Joe was able to speak with the champion in passing when he was checking into the hotel.

We had been hanging around the ground floor of the Congress Plaza Hotel when Timmy spotted Fred's clan of little trainers pulling bags out of a motorcar. Joe jumped on the opportunity to speak with him and came bursting out the big brass door to the street. "Fred! When are we going to have our bout?"

Gottlieb rolled his eyes as he turned around to focus on the random competitor and leave his luggage for his entourage. "I don't know why anyone thinks that just because they ask for a match..." He stopped when he got a good look at Joe. "You are that guy from New York."

Joe smiled and puffed his chest out, encouraged that the world's champion remembered him. "And I have been planting seeds all the way here. I've been talking up our confrontation at every stop along the way."

"What was your name?"

"Joe The Strangler Johnson." Again Joe stood with pride.

"I still haven't heard of you. But, I will keep an ear open and if I hear that there is an interest in a bout between you and I then I will set it up. But if there isn't any chatter, then you are out of luck."

Joe wanted to be annoyed that Fred had misled him. He wanted to be angry that he was having to prove his value, but in the end he was ecstatic that there was any chance the match could actually happen. It was a strange sight to see a man who wanted so badly to be angry walk around like he was on top of the moon.

We spent a lot of time in our hotel room. We shared a room to keep costs down. Our money wasn't growing as much as we were used to since we weren't working carnival dates. There was a lot of drinking and cards, but I spent most of my time looking out at the street as hordes of reporters lined the sidewalks to get a chance to take a picture of the champion.

Standing at the window while Timmy and Joe mixed children's games with drinking I noticed a familiar face walk into the hotel lobby

below. I turned to see both men taking shots with cards stuck to their foreheads. "Jesse Steamer just got here." I was letting them know out of random interest, but they both took it as a reason to head downstairs. They both dropped their drinks and cards and sprinted for the door. I followed inquisitively not understanding what they were looking for.

When we got to the lobby Fred Gottlieb and Jesse Steamer were laughing with one another and shaking hands. A couple of reporters had cameras set up and tried to get a shot of the two grapplers shaking hands, but Fred held up his hands and seemed to weakly prevent them from getting the shot.

Joe made his way over to the men, but Gottlieb had walked away before Joe got there. When he reached the Dr. he slapped him on the shoulder, "Dr. Jesse Steamer, the Pacific Coast Champion." He stated proudly.

"If it isn't Joe Johnson. You here to watch the fight?" Jesse had a sneer about him that I didn't like. It may just have been me remembering him and Joe planning out their match and destroying my love of a sport.

"Of course. But I am trying to drum up some business as well. I think I want to get in the ring with the champion. Can you put in a good word with him for me? Tell him how great our bout was?"

"You want me to tell the World Champion that you lost to me and he needs to give you a shot?" The suggestion was ridiculous. Why would someone who lost a recent match deserve a shot at the title.

"No, that wouldn't help. Can you tell him how many people we drew?"

"He is about to put ten thousand asses out there in Comiskey park. I don't think he is going to be impressed with our carnival show."

I could see Joe getting nervous. He started swaying left and right feeling the bout slipping out of his hands. Jesse started laughing. "Don't worry about it. I will put in a good word for you. I am working with Gavrie later today, I can talk you up to both just in case Fred loses the belt."

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The favor lifted Joe to an even higher level of excitement. You would have thought he had become the World Champion at that point. I don't know if Jesse ever put in those good words for Joe. The chaos of the fight took over the rest of that weekend.

Both Gottlieb and Stepanchikov held live sparring sessions as they trained for their fight. Gottlieb worked with Wally Zonka a well-developed grappler from Poland that had made a name for himself and his brother Stanley. Stepanchikov worked with Dr. Jesse Steamer. The workouts were held in the park just off the shore of Lake Michigan. It was more of a media stunt than a real training session as each man practiced simplistic holds and reversals while the media shouted questions at the two competitors.

We watched Stepanchikov pander to the reporters while he reversed Steamers weak holds. "Think you will regain your title?" One reporter shouted. "You claimed Gottlieb covered himself in oil last time, do you think he will try and cheat again?" Another said. "Are we in for another two hour classic?" The questions were pointless because they knew what the Russian Lion's responses would be, but they asked them regardless.

After the questions Stepanchikov would look up and answer them from his position on the ground. While talking about going two plus hours Gavrie was in down position. He was on all fours with Steamer was on his back reaching around trying to grab one of the Russian's arms. Steamer stepped to the side placing his foot between Stepanchikov's hand and knee, but the wet grass made Steamer's foot slip and his leg slid under Gavrie and slammed into the Russian's left knee.

The reporters were greeted with a yelp that made everyone jump. Steamer was immediately on the ground looking at Stepanchikov's knee. Everything went haywire. Dozens of doctors, officials, and referees came by to look at the damaged knee of the challenger. Everyone said it was a minor injury and he could continue to challenge for the title. But, any time

someone saw Stepanchikov over the next couple days he was obviously favoring that knee.

The story from that point on was Gottlieb had hired Dr. Steamer to take out Gavrie's knee. The whole thing smelled like a fixed fight to us. We saw Gottlieb and Steamer being seen shaking hands, we knew the reputation of Gottlieb was that he was underhanded, and the injury took place in front of the media where everyone not only could see it, but would report on it.

It was Monday September fourth when the match took place. The ring was placed over home plate. We sat in the balcony somewhere down the third base line. We had a great view, but what I noticed was less about the match and more about the crowd.

It turned out that thirty thousand people paid to get in. It was a gate of about eighty-seven thousand dollars. Fifty percent went to the winner, twenty percent went to the loser, and the rest went to the promoter along with the concessions and other merchandise they tried to sell. Everyone around me had a drink, many of them had bought cigars and food. The amount of money that was spent at that event was mind boggling.

Everyone was set in for a multi hour barn burner. There was the national anthem, a public advertisement for Bull Durham tobacco, announcing of the competitors, their weights, heights, and home towns. Overall the spectacle took an hour before the bell rang. Everyone in the stadium knew the story that Gavrie had a bad knee that Gottlieb had hired someone to injure. It didn't take two minutes before Fred had Gavrie on the mat and was wrenching his knee sideways.

The fans in the stadium booed and hissed at the underhanded tactics of Fred Gottlieb. The first fall came quickly, maybe five minutes in. They broke and returned to their corners. When the bell rang for the second fall the crowd was solidly behind Stepanchikov. But within minutes Gottlieb was attacking his opponents knee with punches and kicks that kept the Russian falling to the mat.

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At nineteen minutes and fifty-one seconds, the rematch of the century was over in two consecutive falls. The largest gate of a wrestling match in the history of the world had resulted in one of the most disappointed crowds.

We couldn't get near Gottlieb after the match. We assumed if he wanted the fight with Joe he would get a hold of us. We of course never heard from him. I understood once I saw how much money he was pulling in that a match with a carnival strongman wasn't in the cards. Our ability to bring in a few hundred dollars was nowhere near the forty thousand Gottlieb cleared in that single match.

We returned to Colorado. Timmy came with us where we would spend much of the next six months discussing the match we saw and what we could learn from it. That winter was the start of something. Although it wouldn't be as extravagant as the Gottlieb v. Stepanchikov match, it would influence professional wrestling for the next hundred years.

Stam Bang Wrestling

The drama that was created in Chicago remained on my mind when we got back to Colorado. Our finances were a bit low so we spent a lot of time providing security for the Union Saloon and booked nearly weekly wrestling matches in and around Denver.

I was getting real matches under my belt and was winning close to half of them. Timmy and Joe of course were dominating all their opponents, but they were on a different level than the average local grappler.

Over the course of that winter we found a barn that we could rent out and set up a ring inside of it. I was very interested in how we could increase our weekly income by utilizing the drama that we saw in Chicago as well as the drama we created with Dr. Jesse Steamer.

I remember sitting in that ring in the frigid cold winter of Colorado. “We know that we had a much bigger payday when you faced Dr. Steamer at the end of the week. Why can’t we create that same drama wherever we go? You can still run your strongman gimmick, but at the end of the week we have some big blowout match that we draw a big crowd for.”

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Joe wasn't the smartest guy to enter a wrestling ring, but he liked to ponder ideas and look smart. "That worked because people know him out there. We would need a local guy at every stop."

I was always careful to not insult Joe when I disagreed with him because he was so much larger than I. "I don't think that was it. I think people came out to see the fight because they identified with the story. They identified with being cheated and wanted someone to stand up against the evil cheater. Just like with Gottlieb. The idea that he was cheating was all over the place. We couldn't get away from that story in Chicago."

Timmy was laying in the center of the ring looking up at the owls nest built in the rafters of the barn. "You are right. Everyone was wanting the cheater to pay his dues."

Joe a bit annoyed that he was considered wrong, "Are you wanting to run that same gimmick in every town. I cheat someone then they beat me up at the end of the week?"

Timmy responded softly, "I think we need a different story. Something else people will be passionate about."

Joe laughed, "What? Do you want me to beat up a little girl?"

I thought he was on the right track. "No, but you could beat me up." I was almost fourteen and was starting to get an adult sized body. But, I was still a scrawny bag of bones compared to Joe. "You can beat me up, maybe injure me. Then at the end of the week I can come back. David slays Goliath!"

There was a brief pause as my words hung in the icy air. Then booming guffaws came from both men. The idea that I stood a chance against Joe even in a fictional bout was beyond ridiculous.

"No. You can't beat Joe, but I could. Or maybe I pick on you, beat you up and then you rally Joe to take me down."

We tossed ideas around for weeks. Eventually, we came to the idea that Joe could beat me up taking my money from me match after match and eventually Timmy would come to save the day. He would cause a

huge commotion and the two would fight in the dirt circle to a draw. Then we would set up the big blow off match at the end of the carnival run.

The idea was great and we spent most of our free time that winter working on how to make things look the best they could. I had been adamant about Joe's legitimate matches not having the same intensity and shock value that his match with Jesse did. I felt the same for the Gottlieb v. Stephanchikov. There was something about their match that didn't feel like a nonstop chain of boring holds.

We tried a bunch of different moves to see what looked the most brutal for Joe to beat me with. We did submission moves, straight kicks and punches, choking me out, but it was when I accidentally kneed Joe in the groin when we struck gold.

Joe was shuffling me to his side so he could do a side leg sweep when my foot got caught in his. I shook my leg to get around his boot when my knee collided with a hefty force into Joe's important parts. He groaned in agony and pushed me away with two hands.

Not realizing what was happening I didn't hold my ground at all and I sailed through the air landing in between the ropes and falling out of the ring entirely. I had sailed a good ten feet sideways before my near five foot fall to the ground below.

Timmy leapt up to see if I was ok. When he realized that I had landed flat back and just had the wind knocked out of me, he was nearly jumping up and down he was so excited.

"Do that again!" He screamed as he helped me up and back into the ring.

Joe, bent over trying to breath, choked out, "Do what again?"

Timmy rolled me back into the squared circle, "Throw him! When Squirt left the ground I thought he was going to get hurt, but he didn't. We need to find a way to put throws into the show."

This was the beginning of Slam Bang Wrestling. It was putting on a show that was more about violence and people defying the odds of injury than it was about holds and getting one up on your opponent. Over the

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course of that winter we developed a slew of moves. We created the body slam where one person would lift their opponent off their feet and slam them flat on their back. We started the back body drop. Where one person would bend at the waist with the other running at them. When the running person tried to jump over, the person would stand up and throw their opponent's legs into the air creating a huge beautiful arc as they were flipped into the air. We also created Irish whips, drop kicks, and the leg drop.

This influence would shape the sport of professional wrestling moving forward. Once people saw the flashy violent nature of Slam Bang Wrestling, they would never reach back for the slow plodding styles of the previous century.

We had received a letter from Radisson letting us know that he had found himself another strongman and we didn't have a place on his train. We ended up leaving Colorado in early January of 1912. We realized that we would need a new carnival to be a part of and we would need a few more people on our team. When we promoted the match between Joe and Jesse we had two of Jesse's people promoting the show also.

We jumped onto a boxcar and rode east. Timmy had spent multiple winters in the Missouri, Tennessee, Arkansas area so we headed that way to talk to some of the grapplers he had met over the years.

We went from St. Louis to Nashville to Memphis picking up a friend at each stop. In St. Louis Joe and I were introduced to Theodore Cur. He was from Quebec and preferred to speak French. He was a short stout man that was built like a boulder. I was at my adult height of five foot nine inches tall, short for a wrestler, but Theodore looked up to me. He would have been the least intimidating person, but he weighed in at nearly three hundred fifty pounds and there was not a speck of fat on the man. He had gained the moniker 'strongest man to ever live'.

My belief in wrestling was still challenged when we met him because he did not even hesitate to join us regardless of the fact that we told him any matches he had would most likely be non-competitive. But,

he was living off his past fame and wasting away. Theodore was a great man, but wouldn't be with us long before he would cut ties and head back to Montreal.

In Nashville we picked up a young guy who was over seven feet tall. I regret that I don't know his name, we all called him Giant. He had a condition known as acromegaly although he was too poor to see a doctor so he just assumed he was tall. Acromegaly is a terrible disease where your body never stops growing because of a tumor on the pituitary gland. People with this disease don't live long.

Giants have a long history in wrestling. There are few attractions that draw as well as a giant. Unfortunately, we had to buy train tickets because the giant was too hard to hide while illegally jumping freight cars. It was a short ride from Nashville to Memphis where we happened across the Campbell Brothers Circus. It was advertised as a twenty-five car circus, but in reality the business was faltering. They had twenty-five train cars, but three of them were empty. They had a big top, some side shows, a trained lion and elephant, and a couple of young men that had no idea how to run a business.

We signed on with them in late February of 1912. The big show was an acrobatics act. They drew the vast majority of the money and the rest of the carnies suffered a bit because of it. We were given our own tent to use as we pleased. When we were with Radisson we gave him a percentage cut, but we were trying to be better businessmen and we negotiated a fifty dollar a week rent, which was only two-thirds of what Radisson was making from us. We were given a railcar which Joe tried to play off as a big perk that we swindled the Campbell brothers out of, but in reality they had empty ones, it was an easy perk to throw at us.

It felt good to be back on the road and with a new plan that we thought would put us on easy street. The plan was to have Joe beat me up a few times in front of different patrons and then have Theodore come in to save the day setting up the big match at the end of the week. We didn't

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have a huge tent, so we wouldn't be bringing in a thousand dollars with the show, but we all felt like it was at least a proof of concept.

The Campbell Brothers

Fold

1912 was a whirlwind of growth and learning. The first stop we followed the plan. Joe did his strongman gimmick where he challenged the locals. On the first day I challenged him to a fight and he would dismiss me and throw me out. I challenged him over and over until the people watching started to feel bad for me. Then Giant would emerge from the crowd and challenge Joe to a real match at the end of the week. It worked well. Joe brought in close to a hundred fifty with the locals challenging him. We brought in another hundred in ticket sales.

That first stop we ended up with two hundred fifty dollars. The fifty dollar cut went to the circus, then we split the other two hundred among the five of us. Timmy, Joe, and I took a larger cut since we felt that we were the ones running the show. But Giant and Theodore got twenty-five dollars and the three of us got fifty a piece.

By the second stop Theodore and Giant were asking if we could run more than the one match at the end of the week. We ran the same

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gimmick with me getting pummeled by Joe and Giant coming in to rescue me with a large show the last night of the carnival, but we also ran a match mid-week with Timmy taking on Theodore. That show didn't have the same draw, but there was no story leading into it, it was just a wrestling match promoted for Wednesday night. That stop we pulled in three hundred. Things started to explode as we went from town to town. We picked up a couple more wrestlers and started running one match a night at the carnival while a couple of us would also wrestling Friday and Saturday in whatever town we were in taking on local grapplers.

The money was becoming phenomenal. As more wrestlers joined our group initially the amount of pre-determined fights bothered them, but when they started seeing the paydays, they all got on board.

We built out our boxcar with six rooms and a lounge. It gave us space to sit around and come up with storylines for the next stop while still having a place to sleep. It was thousands of times better than riding in the supply cars. As we built a name for ourselves throughout the country people started calling us the Dusted Triplets. It was a reference to Timmy, Joe, and myself and either how dirty we were or how everything we did was covered in a golden dust. I heard both rumors, but didn't care which was real.

Eventually there were at least two people per room as we were outgrowing our small circus accommodations. Our reputation started to outweigh that of the rest of the circus and the Campbell Brothers painted our car to advertise the Dusted Triplet's Slam Bang Wrestling on the side.

By that September we had everything down to a science. It all started on the first day of the carnival where I would spend thirty minutes spending dollar after dollar being the only challenger to Joe's strongman gimmick. I would yell at him and demand him to take me seriously and eventually he would give me a bear hug and jump on the ground appearing to belly flop his massive body on top of my scraggly one. People would boo while I laid on the ground moaning in agony.

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As medics would find their way to my aid Giant would come from another nearby area of the carnival and start to smack Joe around. They would each hold their own and declare they would take one another on that Sunday.

Over the next few days I would go around town and hype up the match and let everyone see how damaged I was. In the meantime, Theodore would take over the strongman gimmick, road life had been getting to him and he didn't have the desire to work full matches. Timmy and the new guys would hunt for marks, promote Theodore as the strongest man to ever live by talking about how he lifted five hundred pounds with one finger and other ridiculous feats of strength, and utilize the tent for nightly bouts or head into town to promote the wrestling group that way. We were always leaving our Colorado contact info for anyone that wanted to join up or possibly book us moving forward.

By Sunday we had made sure the patrons saw big moves that looked like they could kill someone. When Joe and Giant would fight they would utilize wooden crates, chairs, and rope to give a feeling of true out of control violence. Giant would win and the crowd would head home happy then we would all revel in what was becoming a very large amount of money.

I was in heaven other than the fact that I was starting to not get much ring time. Although I left home to become a grappler I spent most of my time pretending to be injured and promoting the shows. Other than the initial beat down from Joe I almost never got a chance to meet anyone in the ring.

In October of 1912 the Campbell brothers sat the entire carnie crew down and let everyone know that they were going out of business. Instead of heading to Montana for Winter they were selling all the equipment and ending the show. I felt bad about the situation we had with the Campbell brothers because we were pulling in money hand over fist and very little of it was getting back to the circus.

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It was a somber event as most of the people that lived with that circus had nowhere to go. There was no home base they could return to and no family to fall back on.

We had our own meeting with the wrestling crew. It had grown to nearly fifteen people. We sat them down told them that the plan was for the three of us to head back to Colorado. If anyone wanted to join they were more than welcome, but we didn't have a place for them to stay, they would have to figure that out on their own.

We explained our security gig with Union Saloon and that we would be planning on rolling out in February or March for the next carnival season. We told everyone we would find a new circus to attach ourselves to. We told them that if they came to Colorado there would be some paydays, but not like it has been. So if they wanted to head their own direction we needed to hear from them by the new year so we could clue them in on where we would be headed.

Our meeting was much more lively than the Campbell brother's. Our crew took it largely as typical off season and they would find out what was going on in a few months.

Theodore headed back to his birth town of Montreal. He would stay there for a couple months, depressed, over eating, and not getting any exercise. He would pass away and be remembered in his home as the strongest man to ever live.

Giant came with us and brought along a fortune teller he had become smitten over. She was out of work and had spent much of the last couple months taking care of him since he needed quite a bit of attention. Not only was it difficult for him to do anything since all equipment was miniature to him, he also often hurt from the growing in his bones and organs. She was in her mid-thirties, ten years older than Giant, but seemed to truly like and care about the man. Just like a true carny she didn't have a proper name. Her carnival gimmick was Madame Iseeyall, but she wanted everyone to just call her Lady.

Richard W. Kelly

Two other guys came with us, the Grunt brothers. They were identical twins that fit the bill for young, hunky, gorgeous men. They had the long blond hair, perfect physique, and tanned skin.

Most of the crew went their separate ways with intentions of joining back up with us, but almost none of them would. Things would change over the next few months and most of the grapplers wanted to remain in their comfort zones.

The Dusted Triplets
Professional Wrestling Tour

We returned to Denver and were met with a saloon owner that wasn't very happy about the amount of mail we had sent to the saloon.

"Well the famous wrestling group returns." Earl, the owner of the Union Saloon shouted as we walked into his business. A few years before it would have just been Joe coming in to snag a room and help out with security, but now it was seven people walking into western business including a woman and an enormous man that just wasn't going to blend into the background.

"Are you expecting a bunch of rooms now? First you flood my mail with your wrestling fan mail then you show up with an entire entourage? I want you all out of my saloon and I want you to get all this mail to stop!" He screamed at us as he heaved a large bag of mail over the bar and pushed it towards us.

Joe tried to calm the man down while Lady and I tried to gather the letters that were spilling out of the bag. It was the first time that I saw

how big our reputation had become. Apparently the last six months the saloon had been getting multiple letters every day inquiring about us filling venues, working with circus's, or even bouts against specific grapplers.

The saloon had deemed this too much work to be worth a few months of security and Earl couldn't wait for us to show up so he could blow off a bunch of steam. Joe calmed the man down, listened to his grievances, and then we all headed out to the post office to get the mail sent somewhere else.

We ended up renting the same barn we did the previous winter. The ring was still set up, even our gloves and boots we left behind were still in the barn exactly where we had left them.

We all lived in that barn for the next few months going through the letters, discussing new ideas for storylines, and practicing our slam bang wrestling style. Going through the mail was mostly up to Lady, Timmy, and myself because the rest didn't quite have the skill of reading.

The mail largely fit into four categories.

The first was general fan mail. This was something most of the crew dismissed, but I thought it showed how much people liked to watch our shows. I thought the more fan mail we had the more people there were out there that were willing to pay for us to entertain them.

The second was people who owned buildings and heard we were selling large audiences for a wrestling show. These were typically owners who were trying to drive some life back into a dying business. These would be requests for us to hold shows in a building or series of buildings at no charge.

The third category was fight requests. These were all over the board. Some were threatening, some were very businesslike, but they all suggested that if Joe Johnson would come to them they could guarantee forty or fifty percent of the gate win, lose, or draw. These were very large numbers and sometimes very attractive fights. Multiple regional titles were offered to be put on the line, some grapplers that had become internationally known were approaching us.

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The last category was employment inquiries. Mostly wrestlers, but some managers that wanted to get in as a part of our travelling crew. These were filled with different types of tales, stories about fending off wrestling hookers, working in carnivals, the ability to promote shows to full capacity. They were all very impressive, but not really believable.

It didn't take us a week before we realized we had way more interest than we could capture riding around with a circus. Before Thanksgiving that year we sent out word to everyone that had agreed to meet us next spring for another carnival tour, that we were not going to sign with another circus. We would instead go out on our own tour.

We didn't understand what this would do to our group. Other than those that had come to Colorado with us, no one would take us up on such a risky endeavor. Wrestlers and carnies had co-existed for the last sixty years, this was reinventing the wheel. If you wanted to make a solid amount of money you travelled with the carnival. Unless you were lucky enough to be Fred Gottlieb or Sam Spooner the conventional wisdom said there was no money in a wrestling only show.

That winter was spent working on storylines during the week and going out to burlesque houses on the weekend to tell our stories. I remember that winter more so because I was nearly fifteen years old and my hormones were running wild. If I was still back at home, I would be looking at moving out of the family farm and starting my own family. But, since I was a traveling con-man I only had the ladies of the night to find any interest in.

I took a step back from wrestling that winter mostly because I could mix my duties as a promoter with my growing lust for anything female. We would clear out the burlesque house and set up wooden chairs around a ring and fill the place with nearly two hundred rowdy men screaming for blood. I would keep a table back by the bar where I would be entertained by dancer after dancer. I would buy them drinks and tell them tales of Joe The Strangler or how Giant was found in the caves of Kentucky. These stories were for the benefit of the men getting drinks at

the bar. The girls would in turn hang on me, kiss me, and generally tease me until the end of the night.

There were a couple of occasions that winter where I hired the affections of a prostitute, but there was something missing in that relationship that I didn't understand at the time.

Lady used to pull me aside and talk to me about how the women that I was lusting over had other motives than I did. She would talk to me about meeting a girl that I could settle down with rather than a pretty face that had seen half the beds of the men in town.

Sometimes you realize that no matter how far and fast you run, you can't escape where you came from. I was a farm boy at heart. No matter how much I wanted the life on the road with all the excitement and adventure there was something in monogamy and marriage, that would keep me from believing that I had it all back then.

When the new year came around we realized that we were out performing the small clubs we were utilizing. We moved on to renting out the University of Denver's gymnasium. It was where they played their basketball games and a welcome advertisement for the school since the University of Colorado had just opened their Denver annex trying to hone in on the downtown population.

It was about this time that Joe started to get a big head about him again. Sometime in early January he had just defeated what was probably the fifth local collegiate grappling champion with his rough slam bang style.

I was in the corner of the gym flirting with a girl ten years older than me when I heard a rhetoric that brought back memories of a couple summers before.

"I am better than all your local amateurs. I am the best wrestler this side of the Mississippi. And when Fred Gottlieb stops running from me I will prove I am the best wrestler on this side of the Mississippi, that side of the Mississippi, and all sides of the Mississippi!" Seeing how he just beat up a town favorite that looked like a child compared to Joe's body

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building physique the response was boos and trash being thrown into the ring.

“This again...” I muttered to myself as I watched Joe try and drum up interest in a bout with the world’s champion. The girl that I was trying to impress with my money and worldliness realized I had some kind of connection to Joe, the man who just squashed a local hero and she stomped away from insulted that I had tried to speak with her.

I wanted to be annoyed, but my lack of school or place of business where I could get to know people my own age left me getting shot down most nights that I tried.

As I sat there watching Joe flex in the ring with peanuts and crackerjacks pelting him I realized he may have a point now. Over the last year Joe may have made such a name for himself a shot at the World Title may be in the cards somewhere.

I leapt up from my chair and went to the locker room where all the competitor but Joe were recovering from their bouts. I found Timmy and ran the idea by him.

“We are a big deal now right? I mean how many people do you think we have in each city that are begging us to hold a show?” The wild craze in my eyes was unmistakable and Timmy was worried about agreeing to something on accident.

He slowly responded to me, “We have a reputation in quite a few towns. Why?”

“Joe is out there talking about taking on Gottlieb again.” As soon as the words came out of my mouth Timmy rolled his eyes and let out an exasperated sigh. “But!” I caught his attention back. “We are a big deal now. Why wouldn’t Gottlieb want a match with us now?”

Timmy thought deeply about what I was saying before he responded. “You might be right. But if we are going to try and get a match with him we need to make sure he is hearing about us.”

Over the next week we devised a plan to make sure that Gottlieb would hear about us and Joe’s challenge. We designed a careful tour that

Richard W. Kelly

mixed the highest amount of requests we had received with the typical areas that Gottlieb and his crew ran shows.

We would head east hitting up the southern states with Memphis, New Orleans, Nashville, and Atlanta. Then instead of heading south to Florida where the European wrestlers never visited, we would head up the east coast to Charlotte, Richmond, Baltimore, Philadelphia, and finally New York where Gottlieb was known to spend most of his time.

Everyone on the crew understood the importance of the title. If we had control of the World Title then we could demand almost any payday, challenge anyone we wanted to, and control our own destiny.

The Chase Is On

There was a lot of preparations that were needed before our inaugural tour as the Dusted Triplets Slam Bang Wrestling. Since we needed to book large buildings, needed posters, and other advertising created a head of time we sent out letters in reply to the building owners that had offered their building. We made appointments to meet potential grapplers to join our crew. And, we set up fights with some of the more recognizable names that had contacted us.

The winter raged across the country leaving record lows in many of the southern states we were heading to. Traveling with Giant and Lady left us with no ability to ride the rails unless we were in passenger cars, but with our new plan of a touring wrestling show relying on train schedules wasn't going to cut it anymore. We also had the issue of making sure there was a wrestling ring wherever we went. After much debate we decided on buying both a ring that we would travel with and truck to haul us all around the country in.

We thought that getting a truck to roam around the country would beat taking the train, but we were unaware of what early 1900s technology was about to hand us. The country was largely dirt and gravel roads, the

truck hit a maximum speed of about twenty miles an hour, and the solid tires made for one of the most uncomfortable rides one can imagine.

I was the lucky one that got to learn to drive the beast. It was a 1906 GMC model truck. It reminds me now of the old vaudeville truck that comen used to run medicine shows out of. There was a cab in front that sat four people, typically Timmy, the twins, and myself. In the back there was a big truck bed open to the sky with large panels on either side that worked well for holding in the cross beams for the wrestling ring as well as keeping the bitter cold out since Joe, Lady, and Giant all tended to ride in the back all snuggled up under piles of quilts.

The ride was awful. The engine bounced the cab up and down with a relentless passion constantly tossing you above your seat while the solid wheels allowed for no give when you would land back on the bench. There were no doors, so the cold blew straight through the entire time. And if the ride wasn't painful enough, we could only run during daylight due to the bad road conditions and lack of electric lighting and we moved five to ten miles per hour slower than most locomotives. Instead of covering five hundred miles in a day we could only cover just over a hundred. And at the end of that hundred miles we were beat up and worn out.

Riding in the back sounded better as they were covered up, fairly well protected from the cold, and didn't get bounced around by the engine. But, they were constantly trying to not get crushed by the frame of the wrestling ring and had to deal with large drums of fuel that left Lady sick many days due to the fumes. Carrying fuel was essential back then as gas stations were not yet a thing and you never knew if the general store in the next town would carry any combustible fuel.

In what would have been a two-day train ride, it took us nearly two weeks to make the trek from Denver to Memphis. When we arrived we were exhausted. I had bruises on my shins from my legs being bounced into the front dash of the truck while being bounced all over the place.

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Our trip which consisted of sleeping on the side of the road and hoping that we wouldn't be awaked by Indians or robbers was largely uneventful. As much as we worried about bad things happening, the country was moving away from the wild west reputation it had and was becoming the modern society people enjoy today.

When we arrived to Memphis we met with Russell Garner. He owned the Memphis baseball team. I can't remember if they were the Egyptians or the Turtles or the Chicks, but they played at Red Elm Park better known as the Bottoms. This would be our first stop and first show on the road. It being the off season for baseball Russell had spent the last couple weeks getting his ball players to promote the wrestling show that we had planned for that weekend.

The town was plastered in posters with a menacing cartoon version of Joe taking on a comically large Giant. Down the card mentioned myself, little 'Squirt' Malone taking on the 'submission master' Timmy Sampson. And local favorites the Zonka brothers taking on the Grunt brothers.

We also had a meeting set up with Wally and Stanley Zonka as they had inquired about the possibility of joining our little promotion. I don't know what happened in the meeting as I was off trying to satisfy my teenage urges by flaunting my money in one of the local saloons off Beale street. The first day of that trip I sat at a table buying drinks for myself and whatever local girl I could find while watching the men build Daisy theater, what would be a state of the art movie theater in a few short months.

We spent a couple days seeing Memphis and promoting our show. I found a girl that was close to my age that was impressed with my money and athleticism. It was one of those puppy love situations. Her name was Ethel and she was the daughter of a logger. She was seventeen and looking for a family.

I believe it was the second day in Tennessee, Joe and Timmy were introducing me to Wally and Stanley Zonka. They were going to go over, wrestling talk for win, on the Grunt twins. The match would be an

audition of sorts to see if they played the crowd to our liking. If it worked out they would join us on the road in a few days when we headed south to New Orleans.

We were in Overton Park walking and talking about the business and how we do gate cuts between the talents when I saw this girl in the distance. She was wearing an ankle length yellow dress that tightened with a belt at the waist. The wind blew the pink flowers on her sun hat from side to side as she laughed at her Pomeranian rolling around in the grass.

Just seeing her turned something inside me. I felt a nervous buzz build in my stomach and I couldn't keep my eyes off her. She had a pudgy face that was flushed pink from her laughter. The golden curl that had fallen out of her hat dangled just to the side of her hazel eyes. I couldn't help myself, I shook both Stanly and Wally's hands, thanked them for meeting with me and excused myself as I jogged over to the angelic girl that had just entered my life.

I heard Timmy suggest something about teenage hormones and the men all had a good chuckle at my quick infatuation. It didn't bother me, I knew that I desired something more out of this life and for some reason the girl in front of me must have been it.

When I reached her I did not know what to say so I feigned being out of breath. It was a strange situation because I was used to flirting with women at bars, but this was different, this was someone I truly wanted to meet, not just fill the night.

"Good sir? Is there something I may help you with?" She gave me a cut curtsy as she dipped her head.

I stammered for a good line. "I saw you from afar and had to get a closer look." She tilted her head expecting more, but I didn't have an end to that line. "For your beauty." I blurted it out. She tilted her head the other direction and I nervously continued to fill the silence. "I had to see how beautiful you were." She raised her eyebrows almost to ask if it was true or not. So, again, I incessantly went on. "And you are." Pause. "Beautiful." Pause. "And I." She still stared at me with innocent eyes

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letting the silence between us throw me into full panic mode. "Have now seen it." Pause. "Your beauty. I am will take leave now." I turned on my heel knowing that I was bright red in embarrassment. I started to head back to my coworkers when the girl burst out laughing and placed her hand on my shoulder.

"Please don't leave. You are just so cute and couldn't help but see what you were going to say." She said this as I turned back towards her. She was tilting her head down a bit and looking up at me under the brim of her hat. The pose, the face, the playfulness put me at immediate ease. "I'm Ethel."

The next few days were those of dreams. We spent as much time together as we could. I learned of her life. She had finished school through the tenth grade, helped her father with his logging business where she could, but it was time to leave his house. She couldn't provide enough of a help to bring in any real money and in her eyes was just another mouth around the table.

I told her of my past. Growing up in Texas and becoming enthralled with professional grappling. I told her about running away from home and joining a circus. It felt like everything was meant to be. I had become a part owner of a business that looked like it might work, I was looking for a wife to start a family, and I could take care of this girl.

The memories I have now are those sweet first love memories that you look back on with a fondness that only happens once. We picnicked in the park, we shared stories of our youth, and we spent as much time together as we could. I was ready to take her with me. I wanted to marry her and give her my life of adventure. I know it sounds strange today, but 1913 was a different world. People didn't have the same opportunities as today, marrying into some sort of stable situation was a big deal. We didn't need years to know what we wanted, we only needed to know each other.

The day of the wrestling match I had her sitting in the front row. Timmy even changed the storyline for me, he was going to win, but since I had a girl there to cheer me on, I took the win.

Richard W. Kelly

It was an intimidating sight. I came out of the dugout for my match, we went on first, and walked across the field to where we had the ring, just over home plate.

There were six thousand people from Memphis that showed up for our show. Most of them in the stands off the field, but about a hundred people were in wooden chairs on the field itself. Everyone of course was bundled up keeping warm from the cold.

Timmy and I of course were wrestling in singlets as we usually did and kept a pretty quick paced match mostly to keep ourselves from freezing. It was my favorite performance, mostly because I was impressing a girl. Our match ran close to thirty minutes with lots of near falls, quick reversals, and our patented version of high flying kicks and loud resounding falls. In the end I won two falls to one.

I exited the ring, picked up the robe I had worn out to the ring and joined Ethel in the front row. I thought the excitement of the match took it all out of her, but there was something else.

After getting some hotdogs and peanuts I sat in the chair with Ethel on my lap, leaning her head against my shoulder. I could have spent the rest of eternity just enjoying that one night. But, it would eventually come to an end.

After the Zonka brothers took out the Grunts in impressive fashion and Joe slayed Giant once again the show had come to its inevitable end. Joe stood in the ring with reporters around taking notes, photographers standing behind their flashing tripods, and started shouting about how he was going to find Gottlieb and take his title.

With the sounds of an angry wrestler in the background Ethel looked up at me and asked, "You are going to be leaving Memphis now?"

"Yes, we have to move on to New Orleans." She nodded her head and leaned into my shoulder. "But, you need to come with us. I love you and I want to marry you."

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She pulled away with tears in her eyes and stood in front of me. “My family is here. My life is here. If you could learn the logging or cotton business.”

Almost as if by cue I heard Joe off in the distance, “I will search New Orleans, Nashville, Atlanta. I will find Fred Gottlieb and he will give me the match that he knows I deserve.”

I knew that my life was on the road chasing a dream. As much as I felt that I wanted to be married and have a family, it was secondary. As much as I love Ethel in that moment over those few days, it was secondary to wrestling.

We didn't say goodbye, we just left everything as it was. It was the perfect week for me. I treasure it even to this day. In another world I would have stayed with her. In another world she would have run away with me. But that wasn't the world we were in.

The Road

I was a depressed mess in New Orleans. We arrived in New Orleans on Thursday February 13, 1913. I remember because the previous Tuesday was Mardi Gras and I was indignant that I missed it. I wanted some way to ignore my emotions and return to living my dream.

Lady and Giant spent a lot of time trying to talk me through what I was feeling. Giant didn't like the atmosphere of someone being negative all the time while Lady wanted to make sure I didn't drown my sorrows in booze and prostitutes. Now, years later I can safely say that wasn't what I did. But, it might have been Lady who kept me from it.

New Orleans was a fun town that I was too upset to take in. We had a good show with a crowd of around two thousand and picked up a young grappler just a few years older than I was named Troy Stanton. His younger brother John wanted to come along as well, but he didn't have the build or charisma that Timmy and Joe required.

We went from New Orleans to Nashville to Atlanta all holding shows with multiple thousands in attendance ending with Joe screaming at reporters that he wanted to get his hands on Fred Gottlieb. The amount

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of press we generated had to be getting back to the champion. I felt that by the end of the year we would force Gottlieb into a response.

The money that was coming in was unbelievable. Timmy, Joe, and I were bringing in four to five hundred a week each. We were able to pay everyone working for us at least a hundred dollars a show, which outpaced almost every carnival gig that they could get. On our bigger shows we had paydays of over two hundred dollars a person.

I continued to try and find love although I was salty about it by this point. I didn't believe that I could have the loving marriage that I was longing for and still try to live my dream of being a grappler. I was coming to terms with my fate.

I spilled most of my heartbreak into our show. I came up with the idea that Tony and I were fighting over a girl. We even ran a spot in Charlotte where both Tony and I flirted with and tried to woo the same girl. I flirted with her at the beginning of the week and Tony found his way to her in the middle of the week. I brought the girl to the wrestling match and while in the audience Tony attacked me.

We brawled in the audience until One of the Grunt brothers who was working as a referee saw us in the crowd and they brought us into the ring. It was a great story and the crowd was in awe with what they were witnessing. We never tried it again because in the papers afterwards there were suggestions that we were planted in the audience. As much as we wanted to make a lot of money and tell fun stories, the most important thing was to be sure that we protected the business. There could be no situation where the public was brought into the realization that everything we were doing was one hundred percent legitimate.

We had to be creative with the cards also. When we got to Atlanta the papers pointed out that Joe had defeated Giant in three different cities the three weeks before their show and to expect the same at the Atlanta Municipal Auditorium. We had to start shuffling the talent. Joe would get his shot at everyone in the company to show that he was our dominant force.

After he got through the roster we had him in handicap matches against both the Grunt brothers or both the Zonka brothers. We tried putting people in masks and of course letting Joe beat up on whatever local talent there was.

My matches became fewer and farther between. The scare of giving away the business with my stunt with the girl was part of it, but it was also that I had a better eye for the production. I could source referees, deal with lighting and security. I just had a knack for putting on a better show. It also gave me more time to be a horny teenager and flirt with girls.

After Atlanta, Charlotte, and Richmond we had planned to head to Baltimore, Philadelphia, and New York City before we would regroup and decide where to head next. We carried a list of all the places that had sent us offers over the past winter. The idea was once we got to New York we would gauge Gottlieb's desire for match. If it was looking likely we would tour the northeast where the biggest fights usually occurred. This would be costly as we didn't expect to draw as big of crowds in the northern cities where they were used to big fights. If it didn't look like we were going to get the fight, we were going to head back south and run through Florida and around the gulf coast. The south was a market with little competition, so we would likely make more money.

Our roster remained in flux during the tour. We would pick up wrestlers and sometimes they would exit the tour. When we got to Baltimore the Grunt brothers decided they didn't want to travel anymore and took their earnings to establish themselves in Maryland.

The last night in Baltimore when Joe was up giving his spiel to the press we received news that Gottlieb was planning for a major announcement in New York City. The planned announcement was for Saturday night when we would be holding our show in Philadelphia. The assumption was that the champion would be announcing his next title defense. The defenses were coming in slower and slower. When he won the title initially back in 1908 he would announce five or six defenses every

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few months. But over the last two years since he won the rematch with Stepanchikov he had only had only defended the title five times.

The ride up to Philadelphia was pretty intense. We knew that there wasn't another grappler out there with as much buzz as Joe had. And a match with the champion would be a gold mine. Of course Joe couldn't get off the idea that he might win. That he could be the next World Champion. To his point, he had become significantly better with all the local talent he got to grapple with and our form of wrestling was proving to be much more popular than the slow mat wrestling that most everyone else was doing.

That was the only stop I have ever been at where I was too preoccupied to go see a sight, or flirt with the local girls, or just take in a play, but that week in Philadelphia our future was so bright we didn't want to jinx anything. Just to prove our point on Joe's worthiness for a title shot instead of a full card of matches we only booked a single match. It would Joe Johnson running a gauntlet. This was where we would start with two competitors who would fight to a winner in a single fall, then the winner would face another competitor to a single fall, then another...

The card read Dusted Triplets Slam Bang Wrestling night of the gauntlet. See Joe Johnson, Timmy Sampson, Wally Zonka, Stanley Zonka, Troy Stanton, the Masked Nightmare, Pierre Laforge, and Giant all fight to a finish to determine the King of Slam Bang Wrestling!

For the first time in months I wasn't focused on a match, or a girl, I was just focused on the event coming out perfect. I made sure the photographers were positioned to catch all the action, I had reporters spread out in the first four rows. I even made sure to have a special time keeper who was a representative from the Philadelphia Athletic Commission.

It was a perfect show. The crowd was white hot and cheering for Joe the whole night. Instead of our typical three card show they got seven back to back Joe Johnson matches with him defeating Giant last making it seem as though he could climb any mountain and slay any dragon.

At the end Joe stood tall in the ring. He was expecting to continue his tirade of hounding Gottlieb for a match, but as soon as the reporters were let loose and they surrounded the ring something was different. Instead of Joe making remarks that the press dutifully wrote down for their respective papers, the reporters immediately starting shouting and waving at Joe.

Joe was confused and exhausted, but he posed for some pictures and winked at some young kids in the crowd before he pointed to one of the reporters asking him what his question was.

The reporter nearly climbed up on the ring apron to make sure Joe heard him, “What is your reaction to Fred Gottlieb’s announcement ten minutes ago?” The man’s voice was nasally and almost came out in squeaks.

Joe laughed at the idea that he knew what the announcement was. “I was a bit busy with seven other men ten minutes ago. So, I don’t know what the announcement was. But, I would guess I either need to accept his challenge or I need to head off to New York and demand an answer as to why I am not the next contender for his title.” He continued to pose, but was a bit taken aback when the reporters didn’t accept his answer.

Another reporter screamed out among the madness at the side of the ring. “Joe, he didn’t announce a contender. He vacated the title. Fred Gottlieb just retired.”

Crowning of a New World Champion

Every once in a while, there is a setback that completely derails any plans you have. We had been focused for two years on getting Joe a match with Fred Gottlieb and when we thought, we had all the momentum the man retires and sends our plans into a whirlwind.

We packed up our stuff and headed up to New York like we had planned. We rolled into town sometime in the middle of the night. It may have been four or five in the morning. However, even at that late hour the wrestling world was on fire and descending upon New York City.

Luckily, we had planned to be there months in advance so we had a place to stay and a show booked for later in the week. This wasn't the case for the majority of the grapplers that were showing up hoping to somehow get in the mix for the newly vacated World Championship.

What we hadn't heard when we arrived was that Gottlieb had made remarks about dropping the title. He suggested that a tournament be held. He called on the Athletic Commissions of New York, Chicago, San

Francisco and Atlanta to mark their top competitors and partake in a winner take all tournament that would culminate in crowning a new undisputed wrestling champion of the world.

Normally there was a wrestling event a couple evenings each week in the big apple, but with Gottlieb retiring, every venue that could house a match had one. Playhouses that were between shows were hosting wrestling cards, burlesque venues, bars with enough floor space, and even the occasional park or street corner that could fit a ring was featuring wrestling.

We of course had our own crew that would not only fill out our card when the weekend came, but since there were wrestlers from all over the country trying to display their aptitude for the sport we were able to book as many fights as we wanted building up until Friday.

Joe, Timmy, and the Zonka brothers picked up a match every night. These were all shoot fights as no one was willing to lose a match while trying to defend why they needed to be a contender for the World Title. Timmy suffered one loss to a spry kid that caught him in an unexpected toehold. Joe racked up nearly a dozen wins over the course of three or four days. The Zonka's each got a couple wins as well.

Troy had a notable loss to his younger brother that we had rejected from our show just a few months beforehand. It was a brotherly battle that got out of hand. John told Troy he would take a dive, but when push came to shove, he caught his older brother off guard and picked up a bit of credibility in the process.

By the time Friday had come around Dr. Jesse Steamer and his manager Billy Mulders joined us. Billy was well passed his prime, but a huge name in the wrestling world. In an attempt to get some more eyes on our show, since there was suddenly fierce competition, I agreed to wrestle Billy. The idea of the former hero and what many believed to be the first true World Champion was what we needed to get a few hundred heads into our show. It wasn't the type of payday we had been getting used to, but it also wasn't the same world it was just a few days earlier.

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In the main event we had Dr. Jesse Steamer defending his Pacific Coast Championship to Joe Johnson. In the talks throughout the week everyone had decided that out of the Dusted Triplet roster and Jesse Steamer, Joe was by far the one with the most momentum and publicity to have a chance at getting into the tournament. It was decided that Joe gaining the Pacific Coast Championship would be another accolade to his credit. The agreement was that he would return to the west coast in the next year or two, hopefully with the World Title, and get a big money making rematch.

In an attempt to garner as much publicity as we could Joe destroyed Steamer. There was almost no offense and Joe utilized all of our slam bang wrestling tactics. The match ended with Joe slamming the doctor's face into the turnbuckle over and over until the referee stopped the match due to Jesse Steamer being unconscious.

No matter how violent Joe was and no matter how many reporters he had claiming he was the toughest man in country, Joe did not make the ranks of the New York leg of the tournament.

San Francisco and Chicago had already begun their tournaments as well, so we got back in the car with the intention of heading south to Atlanta and see if we could sneak into the bracket there.

Unfortunately, traveling by truck left us too slow, the tournament for the Atlanta section of the bracket was filled before we returned to North Carolina. Defeated and depressed we headed south to Florida. We had received a solid offer to fight someone in Miami that claimed they held some offshoot of the World Title. We figured the money was good and if we could capture another World Title whether it was legitimate or not would give us just that much more credibility to challenge the winner of the tournament.

We spent a week and a half making the trek to sunny coast of Florida. Once we hit northern Florida we were driving through roads that had been built up around the swamps and marsh of the everglades. Not only did we have to worry about the bumps and bangs of the road, but the

wet conditions left us with the real possibility of getting stuck in the mud. By the end of the trip I was so shaken from the bumpy ride that I was ready to sell the truck and find a different mode of transportation.

Even with my foul mood from the transportation when we arrived in Miami I was welcomed at every corner by a beautiful woman, half the time in a swimsuit. Miami was a different world. There were huge hotels all along the beach with men walking around the streets in only trousers and white shirt, speaking Spanish while smoking cigars.

There was a bar on every corner trying to coax the next guy in to buy their special mix. Women were everywhere. At the hotel pools, on the beach, at the bars... The dress of the early teens wasn't as risqué as it is today, but as a fifteen year old boy I was in heaven. The girls weren't only scantily clad and very forward compared to other places I had been, but they were often of a Caribbean flair that I found massively intriguing.

I had every plan of making my move on as many of the women in town as I could, but my plans changed once we found the local gymnasium where we were to meet with the grappler that had contacted us.

We walked into the local facility like a crew of mobsters, all walking with a purpose flanking our most senior member, Joe. We busted through the doors and shouted at the poor folks behind the desk, "We are looking for Levine, is he here?"

The older couple who probably spent most of their day taking money from children who want time on the basketball court just shrunk down behind their desk and pointed at the back.

We walked in unison the direction they showed us and barreled through another set of swinging wooden doors making our presence known in the weight room. This was when I saw the most perfect woman of my life. She was sitting on a bench curling some large dumbbells. She was twenty-five years old and had the self confidence of the most accomplished person I had ever met. Most people wouldn't have called her a classic beauty, but she made my heart skip beats immediately. She was stinky and muscular with thick strong legs and a short torso. Her arms

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were lanky yet well defined. She had short black hair and a squared off jaw. Her complexion was much too fair for the happening city of Miami.

Even remembering her and describing it I can't do her justice. It isn't the physical attributes of her as much as the undeniable mystique she always had following her around. If you ever have experienced that love at first sight you understand the heights my stomach was trying to reach.

Joe called out to the woman, "Miss, I am looking for Levine." He paused as he chuckled with the Zonka twins, "the World Champion Levine." He utilized his air quotes for the title.

The woman set down her weight and walked over to Joe holding her hand out in front of her. "Cody Levine, nice to meet you."

Everyone in the room froze. There was no chance we had just travelled through the marshes of Florida to face a woman.

Cody stuck her hand out a bit farther, "and you are?"

Joe obviously annoyed with the situation reluctantly and gingerly shook her hand, "I am Joe The Strangler Johnson."

Cody's eyes lit up with recognition of who the man in front her was. Her tough attitude dropped for one of appreciation and hospitality. "Thank you so much for making the trip down here. I hadn't heard from you so I thought you wouldn't be coming. And then with Gottlieb and the tournament I assumed you would be busy for a while."

Joe now annoyed that he had a blabbering fan in front of him reasserted himself. "You said you were some kind of World Champion?"

Cody nodded and jogged to the back of the room to retrieve a duffel bag.

Joe continued trying to let some of his frustration vent, "We know you aren't the World Champion because Gottlieb was the World Champion, but if you want to make some kind of claim..."

Cody handed Joe a belt. It was a large red leather strap with some silver plates mounted on it. He looked at the center plate which read 'Worlds Champion Female Wrestler'. Cody interjected her ideas, "I know you were after Gottlieb. But, I have met the man a few times and a

legitimate challenger wouldn't really interest him." She stammered on like a giddy child telling her parents about her school mates. "But, a good story gets him every time, so I was thinking you could come after me and take my title giving Gottlieb the opportunity to be a hero and save the poor woman wrestler who got beaten up by the big bad monster. But, that won't work now. So, now I am thinking that maybe..."

Joe cut her off, "I am not wrestling a woman." He had his eyes closed and was breathing slow and steady trying to control his anger.

"You don't have to fight me. It doesn't make sense anymore. But, I can take on one of your boys here." She said it with no anxiety at all, just full confidence that she could take anyone in that room on in one on one competition.

"What? If anyone on our crew lost to you, it would be the end of our career."

Cody laughed at the idea, "You are right. Let's at least talk some business see if we can come up with something. Either way for making the trek down here I would be happy to let you run whatever card you want here for the next couple of weeks, take the whole gate and I can even throw in some of the concessions." This was something we had never considered as a revenue stream.

I don't think her first impression resonated well with most of our crew, but I of course followed every movement of her lips. I missed the conversation and instead watched in raptured awe as she smirked her way around some of the toughest men I had ever met.

We stayed in Miami for three weeks. Cody spent most of her time talking with Joe and Timmy about the industry and story ideas. She slowly wore them down and by the end of the three weeks they liked her quite a bit. I, on the otherhand, had trouble building up the courage to talk to the woman. My young success, raging hormones, and general naiveté typically left me with so much confidence that I would try any line on any girl, but Cody was something else. She embodied all the confidence that I normally had plus a strength and passion that I adored.

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My plan of hitting up the beach and flirting with mass amounts of ethnic women was replaced by sitting in corners near Cody and trying to build up the nerve to have a conversation.

Luckily Joe and Timmy broke the ice for me. Half way through the third week Joe, Timmy, Cody, and Troy were sitting in the ring. Cody as usual was throwing out ideas for shows that were coming up, "People around here are used to seeing women wrestling. I could take the bottom of the card and show you what women wrestling can do."

This elicited laughter from the men. We had managed to sell out the gymnasium the first two weeks on both Friday and Saturday. Joe piped up, "Sorry sugar but I don't see why we would risk our gate because you are tired of watching from the stands."

Cody shook her head at the ignorance of the men, but didn't give up, "I just don't think you know what you are missing. I've watched your show and how you manage it. I can help you improve. If it wasn't for me you would have let someone else take all that concession revenue, but thanks to me you are going to be pulling in another hundred a show from here on out, easy." She paused for dramatic effect. "There is a draw that women's wrestling brings that your show is missing." Again, laughter. "Just give me a shot. I am tired of wasting away here in Miami, but I can't venture out on my own. Let me come with you."

Timmy who had drank a few too many whiskeys stood up to decree a challenge. He pointed at me sitting in the corner near the ring pretending to read a book. "If Cody can defeat Squirt then the Dusted Triplets shall expand to include a woman." He pointed at the sky and stumbled to his side.

The idea was sound, she had to try out in order to join the crew. Rather than let her wrestle a woman they wanted to see her against someone they knew. Every other man on the crew was massive in comparison. Joe and the Giant were twice and four times her size comparatively. Troy and the Zonkas all had sixty pounds on her. I was the closest thing to a realistic opponent for the woman.

Everyone slid out of the ring and stood around the edge to see the fight. I sauntered over trying to be as cool and attractive as I could. I rolled into the ring got to my feet. When I reached to shake Cody's hand she whispered to me, "Don't try anything, I have maimed and castrated larger men than you."

I took a couple steps back murmuring what was to be my introduction, "Nice to meet you, I'm Squirt." Still facing Cody I was a bit lost in my own world embarrassed that my introduction didn't work and excited about physical contact with the woman I had been lusting after for the last two weeks.

Before I could regain my composure she charged me and got me in a front waist lock. I reached down to force my arms between hers, but she took her left leg and swept my left leg off the mat, then she kicked me behind the knee forcing me to kneel on one knee. Her waist lock still cinched in she now had the upper ground on me. She lifted her right knee to force my arm backward when I realized she going to try and dislocate my shoulder. In a bout of panic I did the only thing I could see that give me the upper hand. I looked to the sky, then came crashing forward with a brutal headbutt to the woman's jaw.

The impact caused her to let me loose, but I was also pretty worse for wear after the cranial impact. I stumbled a bit trying to get my vision to overtake the dark splotches of shining pain that filled my eyes. But, before I could see Cody had put me in a hammer lock and kicked the back of my knees again. Kneeling with her standing behind me I decided to utilize some of our slam bang wrestling and used my free hand to grab her wrist. I leaned forward and pulled her wrist down as hard as I could flipping her over my shoulder, slamming her to the mat in front of me and releasing my trapped arm in the process.

A couple of 'ooohs' came from the men standing around, but when Cody's eyes locked with mine I saw a fire burning with so much vengeance that I nearly ran for my life. It wouldn't have mattered, she was too fast. Laying on the ground facing the sky, she spun around so her legs were in

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my chest. I expected her to kick with both legs and send me across the ring, but instead she nestled my neck into the back of her knee, then pushed the other shin into my esophagus. I was tapping out in submission before she could lock her ankles around her thighs.

She immediately released the hold and I fell the ground in relief and shock. The men around the ring hooted and hollered talking about how violent she was.

Not realizing I had just survived my first real shoot match, I was lifted to a higher place when she rolled over to her knees, crawled to look me face to face, "That was fun, Squirt. Let me know when you are ready for seconds." And with that she leaned in as if to kiss me. I closed my eyes and was met with a hard slap to the face, a giggle, and when I opened my eyes a quick wink.

My intrigue couldn't get any higher. There was something about this woman that made my whole world tingle.

Safe to say that she convinced the group to let her come aboard. She didn't have long to get ready to leave. After the show on Saturday the reporters in the audience told us that Troy's younger brother John had defeated Clint Coolidge in a tournament final to be crowned the new world's heavyweight champion. He was holding a coronation event and open tournament for his next contender in Chicago. Although we couldn't make the coronation event, we could be in town to try and take part in the tournament.

*Dusted Triplets Featuring
Girl Fight*

On the way to Chicago we stopped at a few of the bigger cities to line up a payday. During these shows I spent my time with Cody where she explained to me that there was a lot of income coming from different avenues during a show. She explained at bigger shows we should be going to a printing press and printing up programs that we could be selling to the audience. These small booklets contained descriptions of the fighters, a bit about their past and what the future could hold for them.

This was the first time she mentioned the idea of getting advertisers. This is of course something we had done in the past, but it was just for advertising spots on the ring apron. She pointed out that we could sell advertising on the ring apron, in the program, a live spot during the show, and even space on the concourse to sell their wares.

She explained to me how much money was involved in concessions. Where the average group of two that came to a show would buy at least one food item and one beverage. While the top tier clients

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would buy three or four drinks per person. She pointed out that if we weren't demanding a percentage of the concessions we were leaving money on the table. We had taken concession money before, but it was when one of the promoters had some kind of ownership in the venue, the idea that we could demand it was new to us.

She also taught me that we can hold autograph sessions where we charge per item signed, exclusive question and answer sessions, we could auction off torn ring mats, old gear, or ring worn accessories. She opened my eyes to a world of income that we didn't realize existed.

By the time we reached Chicago, making money during a show was less about the number of tickets we sold and more about the ecosystem of capitalism that we created within our show. Just a month earlier we would sell out a theatre with six hundred tickets at a dollar a piece and see it as a six hundred dollar show. After Cody brought me up to speed on business in general we could sell out a four hundred seat gymnasium at fifty cents a ticket, but sell food items, advertising, special engagement events, and an auction at the end and be able to bring in five dollar per ticket sold and it became a two thousand dollar show. Of course we kept the splits similar to what we had always done meaning that a small show would allow me to take three hundred dollars while the wrestlers in the show would still get a hundred dollars easily.

We wouldn't see what we could do with big money shows until we got to Chicago. Cody was ecstatic about the payouts. She had been pulling all these strings in Miami to get as much money out of each show as possible, but her limited draw with her women wrestling only pulled thirty to forty people a show. On a good night she could bring in close to two hundred dollars, but lost most of it to overhead, paying the other talent, and promoting the next show. She would rarely take home more than ten dollars a week.

Chicago was the first time we put her on the card and the first time she saw Dusted Triplets payout. But, we needed to give it to her, she

turned our business from a thriving top wrestling show, to the most profitable entertainment tour in the country.

I think it took us nearly a month to get to Chicago. We ran at least ten shows on the way up there bringing our padded pockets back up to what we were used to.

Joe and Timmy had suggested that Cody and I partner up for a while to be sure that any business acumen she had was transferred over to me. It was the start of the first true love story of my life. The two of us were inseparable. We always had the guise of the business to fall back on so we didn't have to admit to anyone that we were quickly falling for one another. But, our business conversations during a show, planning meetings early in the week, and grappling sessions morphed into date nights, fancy dinners, and pure intimacy.

We would pull into a town on Monday where Timmy and Joe would go find us a venue. Cody and I would start planning the card around lunch time when the rest of the crew was around, but by the evening we would be dressed up at a steak house talking about our hopes and dreams.

On Tuesday we would come up with an advertising strategy that would inevitably end up with most of the crew at a saloon talking themselves up while Cody and I would sightsee together while passively spreading the word of the show coming in a couple days.

On Wednesday which was typically our training day we would watch the crew in the ring, giving them advise on how to make things look more realistic or how to protect themselves from possible injury. And by the end of the night Cody and I would run a series of submissions and reversals. Once everyone had lost interest and moved on to their drinking and gambling for the night Cody and I would remain in the ring and explore each others bodies throughout the series of submission moves putting our own safety in complete control of the other giving a sort of vow of trust to one another. Then Thursday through Sunday would be a combination of multiple shows or days on the road. The show nights were wonderful as I got to sit and enjoy my favorite pastime with a woman I

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was falling in love with. I could sit in the back in the darkened corner away from the prying eyes of our coworkers and just hold her as we watched the show unfold to the crowd.

On travel nights I would drive with Cody and Lady who would talk about girly things that they rarely got to do because of their situation.

Chicago was the same atmosphere although there was a slight buzz about the town due to John Stanton being the new champion and keeping the town as his home base for a while. The majority of the wrestling community had moved on realizing the John wasn't going to be defending the belt very often and there was little purpose in sticking to watch him act like a king.

As usual we came into the city with Joe and Timmy heading off to find a venue while Cody and I developed a card. Joe had told me this was the place to put Cody on the card as it would likely be a larger venue the usual giving her the best chance to make an impact.

We had been paying close attention to the papers and realized that John Stanton had only taken on two challengers and both had been recently defeated in unsanctioned matches. We assumed this meant that the new champ was afraid to lose his title. Our goal was to get Joe in the ring with John, but we had to find a way to make Joe look weak to John. So, we decided to promote Joe with the Pacific Coast Title we picked up off Steamer and he would fight Stanley Zonka in a non-title one fall exhibition. We also put Stanley's brother Wally Zonka on the card taking on some local guy who seemed to draw big crowds in the area. And then at the bottom of the card was Cody's shot at showing us what a women's match could do.

I remember sitting at Jo Loy King, a Chinese restaurant that had a full orchestra for entertainment. It was the first time that I felt that jealousy a relationship can bring that could override what my male brain wanted to see.

"I'm sure there is someone I've worked with in this town. We just have to find her and get her onboard. Then it's all about promoting us as

a couple of floozies. Maybe one of us was on the make with the other's husband. It doesn't matter as long as the crowd thinks they are going to see a cat fight with the chance of seeing more skin than they paid for." She told me this in the most nonchalant manner.

I remember specifically dropping my fork and turning my head to stare at her. "I am supposed to not only watch you have your clothes torn off, but stand in a room of men cheering it on?" I was nervous as the words came out as I hadn't expressed my need to protect her yet.

She blushed and reached over holding my hand. "One, it is a show. Two, I am not going to have my clothes ripped off, I just want everyone to think that. And three, relax this is what I do for a living. I am very good at it and even if you don't like it, I can take you down so you are going to have to deal with it one way or another." She smiled that smile that disarmed all my anger as she gave my hand a light squeeze.

We let business pass us by. We finished the dinner and sat side by side with her head on my shoulder as the band played through Tchaikovsky's 1812 Overture except the finale which the restaurant lacked the brass instruments to do it justice. Feeling her body relax against my own leaving her with a vulnerability that few people would ever witness from her moved me more than I can explain.

We left the restaurant and took a carriage back to the shoreline where we talked about what our future held. We made plans to see a show at every theatre on Broadway Avenue. We promised to see Europe together. We committed to growing old together. It must have been three hours in the dark of night sitting on the edge of the lake holding one another for warmth, but also to hold someone who you couldn't stand not to touch. Eventually the cold chill of the night forced us back to the Lexington.

I escorted Cody to my room with the utmost respect for her, treating her as the lady she truly was, something that had escaped her most of her adult life. Once in the confines of my room we disrobed and shared

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the most perfect night. It was not a night of carnal lust or raw energy, but a slow tender experience that connected us beyond this world.

As people we try to connect with one another and try to understand, but that night I was not a single entity anymore. That night Cody and I were one with God and the universe.

I was fifteen and she was twenty-five, but back then I was an adult. I was older than many boys from my hometown that had to leave school and run their family farms. I was older than many of the girls who had been sent away from home and married into a good family. I don't expect the world today to grasp what that moment in my life meant, but I promise you that night I became who I am today. Cody and I understood that we were soul mates.

I wish I remembered more of that trip, but that night has overshadowed so much of that time period in my head. I know the next day we went to the training facility at the Chicago Athletic Commission. It didn't take long after arriving that Cody found a group of female grapplers that she knew from the wrestling world. I would learn that this was common. I had spent the last few years oblivious to the fact that there was a women's division that existed right beside of my own wrestling experience.

After I spent a couple hours sitting in the lobby holding the proverbial purse while she chatted with her friends she emerged from the women's locker room. She had a tall slender woman by her side that also sported short dark hair.

Cody acting like a little kid came jogging over to me and pulled me out of my chair by my hand excited to introduce me. "John, this is Lori Bennice. We go way back. Maybe ten years. Lori, this is John Malone, but don't call him that, everyone calls him Squirt." Lori held out her hand as I tried to do some kind of dainty kiss on her hand which made both of them guffaw in the least ladylike of fashions. My lack of training in manners shined at just the wrong times.

Lori leaned in towards Cody and whispered, "That was adorable."

Cody recomposed herself, “Lori here claims to have been women’s World Champion before me. So, when I beat her I started to claim the same.” She turned to her friend and stuck out her tongue playfully.

I nodded in recognition, “You got the belt from her?”

Lori turned to Cody with wide eyes, “You had a belt made?”

It was becoming quite clear that the women’s World Championship wasn’t quite as prestigious as I had been led to believe.

Cody was focused on her friend again, “Yes, you will see it at the show on Friday.”

Lori leaned towards her friend almost looking like two school girls talking about a boy, “I can’t wait. We haven’t been in the ring together in at least two years.”

“I know and I can’t wait, it seems like every time I get in the ring there is another girl that thinks she can make a name for herself and I have to teach the kid a lesson.”

“I hate it when they won’t just be sportsmen, I always end up with blood under my nails.”

“Isn’t that the grossest thing?”

I jumped in afraid that I was facing another couple hours alone in the lobby if I didn’t interject, “So the two of you are going to rip your clothes off each other then?”

Lori turned her in ring charm on started looking at me the same way the saloon girls did when they knew I had a stash of cash on me. Her voice lowered and slowed, “Think you can handle this cat fight?”

Cody flicked her friend in the ear, “Stop it, he’s mine.” She turned towards me as Lori rubbed her ear and laughed. “And you know damn well that I said my clothes aren’t getting ripped off. This will be my opponent and we will bring a show, it may not be the show that the men in this town are expecting, but I promise everyone is getting their money worth.”

I should have taken notice of what she was telling me, but I only really listened to the idea that she wouldn’t be exposing herself to a room

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full of men. We ran three shows that weekend. Each show sold out to a thousand seat house. We ran the gamut of advertising, programs, concessions, autographs... Each show ended up bringing in between three and five thousand dollars. Cody and Lori would both walk away with a check for over two hundred dollars.

The mixed gender card gave us an odd audience. A third of them would probably have been just as happy at a burlesque show while the rest were the usual blood thirsty crowd we tended to draw in.

We tried as much as we could to make everyone care about the Joe Johnson, Stanley Zonka bout. We had interviews in the local paper, every saloon in town was talking about it, we even spread the story around local barbershops. But, it wouldn't matter. Once the room would witness what Cody and Lori were willing to go through, the rest of the night felt like a dud.

I remember standing ringside worried out of my mind. I nearly ignored the furniture store-owner that spent ten minutes trying to get everyone to his store after the fights from our paid promotional spot before the card began.

Giant stood in the ring with his booming bass voice attempting to announce the women. His voice carried well enough, but it was so deep no one could understand what he was saying. I know he was saying 'in the red corner we have the womens champion of the world Cody Levine.' But what came out was more like "Inna red corner. Eeee 'ave uh womeens champeen of uh whirl, Co-ee Luhvee."

After the introductions the two women stood nose to nose with murderous looks in their eyes. Cody handed her championship belt to the referee without moving her glare. The two women stood in wrestling singlets with an undershirt to keep themselves decent. Lori was in white and Cody in black, the typical garment choice to help the crowd understand good versus evil. The room had a foul feeling to it like you knew something you couldn't look away from was about to happen.

There were whistles and cat calls in the room. As soon as the bell rang both women started launching closed fist punches at one another. Face shot after face shot until Cody backed up to get away from the punishment. Lori responded with a roundhouse kick to Cody's gut. The crowd responded with cheers and a few lewd remarks. She folded forward from the impact, but as Lori reached for her arms she quickly stood back up ramming the back of her head into Lori's chin. Again, the crowd gave their approval with a noticeable call for some 'tits'.

Lori screamed in pain as she stumbled away from her opponent. Cody charged and caught Lori in the gut with her shoulder, pushing her back into the turnbuckle in the corner. The room was loving everything and couldn't wait to see where the catfight would lead. But as Lori's head whipped back and forth from the impact she let out a grunt and spit blood across the ring. The room's cheers started to become more muddled.

Cody continued beating on her opponent. Lori standing in the corner trying to protect her body while Cody executed countless closed fist punches to the gut. The blood was dripping out the side of Lori's mouth and as the referee pulled Cody back she let one kick reach Lori and another spray of blood came from the woman's mouth.

Cody now had blood splattered across her clothes and smeared on her face. The crowd's reactions nearly became a whisper, not out of disinterest, but out of shock and respect for the competitors in the ring.

The match went on for nearly half an hour with dozens of painful looking submission holds, punches and kicks to the sides and back of the head. It ended with a disturbing sequence where Lori was laying in the ring with her head resting against the bottom rope and Cody kicked her in the face causing a whiplash that looked like she broke her neck. Shortly after, Cody had her hand raised to a room full of mostly men who had forgotten what they originally had hoped to see.

Cody walked to the backstage area with men cheering her and telling her how much of a killer she was. Eventually Giant helped Lori to

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the back and the room gave her a standing ovation as well for her amazing efforts.

The match was amazing and as soon as it was over I sprinted to the back to see how Cody was faring. When I got there Cody and Lori were talking like nothing had happened. Cody had a noticeable bruise on her left cheek and Lori was still showing signs of some bleeding from the mouth, but they both were moving around like they weren't even very sore.

When I ran to my woman's side she greeted me with a peppy smile and quick kiss. I looked back and forth between the women and stated what I thought I understood, "You are both fine?"

Cody laughed, "She got a couple good ones on me and I think I pulled a muscle when she applied the Indian deathlock."

I moved my wide eyed gaze from Cody to Lori pivoting my entire body to face her.

She looked at me with an amused bewilderment. "I am fine. I have a gash missing from my cheek and I would love some vodka to wash it out and kill some of the pain."

"Your cheek?" I tried to understand. "All that blood? What happened?"

Lori slowed her speech like I was a toddler and couldn't grasp anything, "When Cody was about to headbutt me in the chin, I grabbed some of my right cheek with my teeth. The impact caused me to take a chunk out of my mouth and we got the juice flowing."

Cody reached up and patted me on the arm, "We wanted to make a good impression and Lori thought the blood would really get the match over everyone." As I processed what they were telling me Cody play slapped my face to bring me to the real world. "Now, please, go get her some damn vodka. I'm sure her mouth is killing her."

The rest of the show was a bit of a bust. There was nothing the other wrestlers could do to compete with Cody and Lori. They proved themselves beyond what any of us expected. The violence and realism they put into their match set a new standard for all Dusted Triplets shows.

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Over the next two nights the crowds chanted for both women, hoping to see another fight. The entire crew was so in awe that we tried to get Lori to join us on the road, but she wasn't interested. She had a life and small family in Chicago along with a fun hobby in wrestling.

I would see many more fights that Cody would be in, but it was only with the few women she really got along with that looked and felt so dramatic.

A Man and His Castle

Stanton didn't take the bait. Joe had a couple very close victories and one substantial loss to Stanley, but John Stanton didn't grant us a match. He did remark on the shows saying, "There may be a future star in the company of the Dusted Triplets. It is a group I will keep my eye on if they come back through Chicago next year. But, if what I heard about their women's match is true, I will be keeping my distance from those ladies."

We had another stop in Michigan with a couple nights of fights. Cody got another match in, but it was against some girl that had built a name in the area. It was a quick shoot match that didn't have any of the drama that her match with Lori had.

With winter approaching it was time to call it a season. Joe, Cody, and I headed back to Colorado while the rest of the crew scattered across the country.

Joe returned to our barn again with our ring still set up. The ropes were starting to show some wear from the weather over the years and the wood under the mat had some warping to it. But, in the end it kind of felt like home.

When we arrived Joe went to the house at the front of the property to make sure we could use it again while I took Cody to the back where she could see our glorious practice barn. I slid open the large red door to expose our old shabby ring in the middle of a some hay and cobwebs. I turned to Cody to see the look on her face and it was everything I hoped it wouldn't be.

With no semblance of humor in her voice she stared at me blankly and said, "You live here?" Before I could open my mouth, "Like sleep, eat, and shit here?" I rubbed the back of my neck as I tried to form words, "And you expect me to live here? John, I know you are young and stupid, but please tell me you aren't this stupid." I stopped trying to figure out what to say, "The love of my life better not be asking me to sleep in a dusty old, spider infested barn." She took one last pause, "In a wrestling ring."

Regardless of her objections we did stay in the barn a few nights. But, we spent all day over the next few days looking for a place to buy. This was before the world of real estate agents. Looking for a place was a combination of talking to folks in local saloons and riding around looking for signs.

Within the first day of arriving I had parked the truck on the side of the barn and bought us a Ford Hudson 54. It was the greatest innovation with cars. Its smaller frame kept me from being shaken like a martini which was something I couldn't deal with anymore. But, it also had a soft top roof with windows that kept the cold air from blowing on you while you were driving around town. We were still a long way away from heaters so it was still a chilly experience, but so was being in a house unless you were right by the radiator.

That first night we went to the Union Saloon. We had a few drinks, told a few stories about a couple years back trying to help with security, and asked around to see if anyone knew of any land for sale. Cody was enthralled with the owner and bartender since he'd known me for a few years. She stayed most of the night at the bar, with one elbow on the

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counter supporting her head as she stared at the man telling her stories of the little kid that helped the prostitutes.

We did sleep in the barn although I think my coat ended up as Cody's blanket. The next day we spent much of the day seeking out the leads we picked up at the bar. We drove to the southern edge of Denver to see a shack left from an elderly couple that hadn't survived the recently warm summer. We then went over to a new town in the east. It was name Dacono, but was referred to locally as Kansas, if you can't see the mountains you might as well be in Kansas. There were no buildings on the land, but a couple dozen acres of flat flat land.

It was a large ranch in a little town called Longmont that got us interested. The man who owned the ranch was recently widowed and wanted to get his life away from his lost loved one. He wanted to move into the city where he could not be surrounded by the memories.

We were still in the early snowfalls, so the land was white, but you could still see the dirt and grass breaking through. The land was generally flat, but had some trees and a creek. The view of the mountains kept me enthralled. As long as you faced west you had the most spectacular view, the flat irons, at the time called the crags, were within fifteen miles of the ranch.

I stepped foot into the house and saw a beautiful main room with windows on three sides that looked out to a wrap around porch. The back wall hid the two bedrooms, kitchen and partially attached outhouse. The old man selling the place could see the interest on my face. He looked me dead in the eye, "I wouldn't feel at all right if I didn't say something. And I'm gonna say it once 'cause God's compelling me to do so. This was a beautiful home, but I swear it is cursed. You may not see it, or I may be looney, but my wife died slumped over next to the mailslot in the door. Her blue dress scattered around her body." He paused as he held back a tear, "Maybe it was just his vengeance on my sins, but I believe it today. I swear this place curses those within it."

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I clapped him on the shoulder and thanked him, but blew it off as the rambling of an old man who had lost everything he had to lose.

I walked out on the porch and looked at the mountains. The view was spectacular. The long winding dirt driveway was far enough from the road that it didn't feel a part of society. This was a quiet and personal place I could relax in between seasons, a place I could connect with Cody, a place we might could start a family.

We bought the house and the surrounding thirty acres of land. With the new car and property we were running low on cash, but we felt that the Dusted Triplets show was profitable enough that we weren't in any danger of going broke.

Reminiscing on that winter feels like watching a Christmas movie. We would work on the house most of the days. It had been built fifty years prior leaving us with constant repairs of floorboards, wood siding, burned ceiling slats from the lanterns and candle fixtures, broken windows... Then in the evenings we would put a fire in the fireplace and cuddle together under a blanket. Some nights we would sing to each other while others we would talk of our past or dreams of our future.

We spent some time exploring our land and the few trees we had. But it was typically an excuse to play in the snow, throw snowballs at one another. Over the course of those four months we were there we would go see Joe once a week down in Denver to keep up to date on his thoughts on the business, we would go into Longmont, get supplies at the general store, meet some of the people in town, even patronize one of the two restaurants. But, we never ventured out to the mountains that first winter. I think we were so occupied by learning about each other that a big adventure wasn't necessary.

One of the last nights before it was time to go back out on the road we were laying in the living room in front of our nightly fire. Wrapped in one another's arms the only thing we had to protect our tangled bodies was the wool blanket we were sharing.

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“There is something I still don’t understand about you.” Cody whispered into my ear as her arms wrapped around my body and clutched my bare chest. “You always talk about how much you love wrestling. About how you left your childhood behind to become a great grappler.” I smiled at the idea. “But you rarely get in the ring.” She kissed my ear as she whispered.

I struggled to get free of her grasp and turned to face her. “I do love wrestling. But, I am not built to be a wrestler.” She smiled and started to trace her fingertips down from my lips, down by throat, down my chest into the darkness of the blanket below. I grabbed her hand and brought it back to my face, kissing her fingers. “But, I think I have more to offer the show as a promoter or a business manager.” I cocked my head to the side a bit, inquiring if she understood.

She wrapped her legs around me and pulled me in against her warm naked body. “I get it, but if you love to grapple you need to do it more.” She leaned in and bit my neck hard enough for me to twitch from the sting. “Promise me you will get in the ring more this year.”

“I will.” It was more of thank you than an affirmation. She started to snuggle her head into my chest. “But, if I am going to get in the ring more, I might need some training. I mean you are kind of a specialist in pinning combinations and I don’t want to look like a schlock of a wrestler.”

Cody quickly grabbed both my wrists pinning each one to the floor on either side of my head. She rolled on top of me, looking down with a sinister smile. She rolled back on her hips, her ankles pressing down on my quads, opening the blanket to the cold air as she slowly and seductively looked at my helpless body. “Get ready. I will show you some pinning combinations.” We both laughed as we contorted our bodies around one another. The cold air constantly worked as a motivator to keep moving. We did not let go of each other all night. It may be my favorite memory of life. It was definitely the most ecstasy filled training session I would ever have.

1914 Season

The next year was quite a bit different. As the winter slowed and the warm interludes became more and more frequent the conversations we were having with Joe started to evolve. Joe was still dead-set on getting himself an opportunity for the World Title.

“Squirt, I’m going to be World Champion.” Joe was laying in the middle of our barn ring exhausted from explaining his position.

“I get that Joe, but there is a lot of money we are leaving on the table by not traveling in the south.” Cody had given up on the conversation weeks before so she was spending time with actual owners of the barn while we hashed out plans. “Spending time in the northeast isn’t going to bring in as much money. You have to deal with a lot of competition especially if you are going to camp out in Chicago where John Stanton is still running shows every month.”

Joe switched to a monotone response because he had gone over his opinion so many times, “You are looking short term. Once I win the title our profitability will go through the roof.” He paused, but before I could object he went on. “Squirt, I think you are right, but I think I am right also. And because of that I think we should split up.”

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I felt a bit of panic rise up in my throat. "Hang on. We can work this out we shouldn't dissolve the business!" My mind was racing with thoughts about whether or not I could manage a company on my own. And, how would I compete with Joe, and if Timmy would pick a side.

"Calm down. I am not saying we dissolve the company. I am suggesting that Timmy and I head north with half of the crew while you, Cody, and the other half head south. We can just run two different tours. Use Cody's belt to promote your shows, pick up some more lady wrestlers, you run your shows how you want and I will head to Chicago and find a way to get that title shot."

It was a strange sensation. I had tried to consider Joe as my mentor, but in reality he was not. If anything I learned more from Timmy and Cody. There wasn't much else to say, Joe laid out a realistic plan that would not only allow us both to focus on what we wanted to, it allowed for the business to grow as much as possible.

With no interest in spending another season riding in a gas powered truck, getting bounced around to the brink of insanity, we all rode the rails down to Little Rock where we met with Timmy and ran the plan by him. He agreed that running two separate tours would be good for expansion.

Timmy had sent out letters a couple weeks back asking everyone that wanted to return for the 1914 season to meet in New York City in late March. The impromptu plan was to head out to NYC and let everyone know what the plan was. It would also be one of the larger pools in the country that we could try and recruit additional ladies to our tour.

Timmy and Joe continued on with hoping freight trains, but Cody and I got tickets on a passenger train. It was a three day trip with a stop in St. Louis and Columbus. Looking back I wish we had taken more trips where we spent time looking out the window at the beauty of the country.

Passenger trains were wonderful experiences back then. Dinner was always exquisite and followed with cocktails and music. I always cherished the days that I could hold Cody and swing gently to whatever

soft music played in the background. I remember hearing the three piece band play a gentle song that had most people conversing with strangers, but I held my love in the middle of that train car. She wore a beautiful gown that shimmered green. It was one of two dresses she brought with us on the road. Her wardrobe was largely wrestling attire, but she had a couple things that could make my heart skip a beat. I danced and drank all the while being grateful that I was getting the chance to experience life with Cody. I was also noticing that it wasn't just me that the green gown was hypnotizing. There was a man with a long beard and pipe that couldn't keep his eyes off Cody. I playfully pointed him out as she would lay her head on my shoulder whispering her love to me.

We danced the night away until we retired to our private room. We hastily peeled each others clothes off and enjoyed a night of passionate embraces while we stared out the window at the majesty of the open land. Wanting to explore each other more and more we left our steam cap fully open and our room stayed toasty with the circulated steam.

I remember awakening, trying to open my eyes, but the bright light was fighting against my eyelids. When the swoosh of the curtains jerked me to reality.

“What are you doing?” I asked as I realized what Cody was doing.

She was standing with her back to the window pressing the curtains against the glass. Her entire body was flushed bright red as she explained, “We have arrived in St. Louis.” He voice was high and cracked a bit as she bit her bottom lip in humiliation.

“I don't remember coming to a stop.” I was missing the point.

“Well, we did. And it has been long enough for the other passengers to depart and gather around our window.” Her eyes were wide trying to force me to understand what she was saying.

It finally dawned on me that we were both completely naked and uncovered since the room was so warm. I started to laugh. Cody reached over and smacked me in the arm. I ducked the hit and commented, “I

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guess some people got a free show. I guess we will be avoiding conversations with people the rest of this trip.”

Cody hid behind the curtain and peeled back the corner so we could see out. Most of the crowd had dissipated, but the man with the long beard was standing there. As soon as he caught a glimpse of Cody's face he smiled a huge grin and tipped his hat to her, then turned and walked towards the depot.

It was one of those moments when your heart beats a thousand times in a minute, but it is followed by a realization that no matter how embarrassing it may seem, it did not matter. Regardless, we spent the next day again in our private room holding one another and watching the scenery pass by as we rode naked through the countryside.

I would not give up the memories of that trip for anything. They often say you regret the things you didn't do rather than the things you did. I think I regret not overdoing the things I enjoyed.

When we got to New York most of the crew was there. Timmy already had three nights of matches booked including a match between Cody and Lady. Cody was livid. There was no way for her to get Lady through a match, the woman had never wrestled before.

In Timmy's defense the only part of our crew that agreed to come on the southern tour was Giant and Lady. I always assumed their desire to come along had more to do with Giant wanting to protect Cody and thinking I was not capable of it. Timmy had assumed if we were going to try and tour we would need Lady to step up until we could acquire more talent, but it put Cody in a bad position. She had to present herself as a legitimate grappler and standing across the ring from someone as inexperienced as Lady would make that impossible unless she was going to maim the woman. I had to take Cody aside and calm her down. We had four days to figure out how to make the match work.

The rest of that week we were holding tryouts for the tour. We wanted a coed wrestling show, so we were looking for four to six women and three to four men. It was a difficult thing to pull off. With the men

in wrestling there was somewhat of an unspoken rule that you could have a legitimate contest while making the whole thing seem more intense than it was. We could get the idea across that as a crew we would not be injuring each other and that much of the fights would be predetermined. But, the women were more concerned about being taken seriously. The tryout matches were brutal and often ended in swollen joints and bloodied faces.

When we thought we had the right set of girls Cody took them into a locker-room to attempt to explain that we were more of a show less of a sport. I don't know what she said, but she took five people in and came out with four new girls on our crew. The fifth would walk away with a bruised face and a warning about not talking to anyone about what was discussed.

Our new girls were Betty, Nell, Virginia, and Mae. We ended up with a few new men as well. We picked up a fast little Asian we referred to as Monkeyman, a burly French named Roberre, Butch who had been deformed from an accident when he was a firefighter, and Silas a young Mexican kid that claimed to have experience in Mexico under a mask.

Things were a bit different with this crew. From the get go, Cody and I were both in charge, we didn't travel the same way the rest of the crew did, we didn't stay in the same hotels, we weren't there as partners as much as we were the bosses.

All of our new recruits were skeptical, but with the claims we had on what their paydays would look like, they all got in line ready to perform. Cody and I skimmed a little extra off the top, we gave Giant and Lady a bit extra from each show as we treated them like our security team, but the performers were still seeing the biggest single day pay days they had ever seen.

We increased our cards from three match cards to six match cards with Lady and Cody headlining most of our shows. Although it seemed like a mistake originally, the crowd reaction in New York was so big that we had to keep doing it.

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The match always started with Cody getting a pinfall on Lady in the first ten seconds. She would get a second fall just as quickly. Then she would challenge her again and make her submit twice in quick succession. Then she would start to slap her around and not let her leave the ring. Eventually I would come to the ring laughing at Lady. Cody would put her in a double arm bar or a reverse chin lock and I would hold up the women's championship and make Lady kiss it.

The crowd hated us. They would boo, scream, throw their drinks at us. But we would celebrate in the ring, kicking Lady and spitting on her while she lay beaten in the ring. Just when it seemed like too much, just when we were on the verge of a riot, Giant would approach the ring. He would come to Lady's aid, but when I tried to run away he would catch me. He then slammed me a few times usually asking the crowd if they wanted another. One night the crowd was so rowdy I think I got slammed fourteen times.

In the end I would end up groveling on my knees kissing Lady's boots to the sheer joy of the crowd. Then Lady would hold the women's championship up as if she had won it, but really Cody always left it in the ring to avoid the humiliation that was allowed to receive most nights.

The first time we did the angle in New York we didn't plan on Giant coming out for the save, but when he saw how violently angry the crowd was getting he had to do something. The rest we made up in the ring that night. It also taught us the lesson that it is always best to send the crowd home happy.

There was a couple week period in the middle of the season where I refused to continue the angle. It happened during a show in New Orleans. We had gone from New York, down the coast all the way to Miami, then back up around the gulf hitting every stadium or gym that could house at least a thousand people.

When we got to New Orleans Giant wanted to try Cajun food because it had so much aroma to it. I swear he ate four pounds of shrimp and blackened catfish. He was eating lunch for hours.

That night when he had me hoisted up in the air asking the crowd if I deserved another slam into the mat the fish started to turn in his stomach. The crowd cheered and whipped my legs over and I fell flat back on the wrestling mat. But, Giant's belly made him feel a bit off. He followed me down to the ground landing on all fours. He nearly crushed me with his four hundred pound frame but managed to somehow straddle my body, but his big gut hung down and pinned me to the ground. Unable to move I lifted my head to realize that I was within two inches of the man's ass when he let a massive fart out.

He sighed in relief while I gagged in suffocation. Not realizing what was happening behind him, Giant got to his one foot, still half sitting on me and I could feel the hot rumble of another flatus. I nearly vomited on the mat as the curdled smell wouldn't leave my nostrils. Needless to say the second he released me I scampered away. I retreated to the back attempting to calm my stomach.

Giant stood up in the ring and shouted, "I think I farted on him." This was the biggest cheer I ever heard from a crowd. The night ended with Lady prancing around the ring with the women's belt and Giant imitating sitting on me and farting.

The rest of the season we went through south Texas, over to the new states of New Mexico and Arizona, then took a line back through Oklahoma to meet Joe and Timmy in Little Rock. We balanced all the books there, split the money and made plans to meet again in late February.

Cody and I headed back to Colorado and spent another glorious winter together. Again, it was largely spent working on the house and the land, but we had a few chances to venture out to explore the mountains nearby. On the cold nights we would sleep in each other's arms in front of the fire on the few warm nights we ended up making love in a sleeping bag partway up the mountain.

1915 Season

1915 would see Cody and my two year anniversary. The season would start with a meeting in Little Rock where I met Milt Sampson, Timmy's brother. He came onboard at Timmy's request so that he could do all our bookings, transportation, hotels, and keep the books straight. In retrospect, I should have realized that it was probably Timmy and Joe not trusting Cody and my accounting from the year before, but it didn't dawn on me at the time.

Again, Joe would be on the trail of the champion, John Stanton who was now accompanied by his older brother Troy. He left the Dusted Triplets to help his brother with bookings. Joe and his crew would be focused on the northeast. Much of their time would be split between Chicago, Boston, New York, and Philadelphia. As always Joe thought he was on the verge of convincing John Stanton to give him a title shot.

Our crews would be just like the previous year except Giant and Lady would stay behind with Milt. I would be focused on getting to the northwest this season. Beginning in Tennessee we would go through Mississippi, northern Louisiana and Texas. Then we would head up

through Colorado, Utah, Nevada, over to California and up the coast to finish off the season.

Milt would eventually leave Arkansas with a new crew headlined with Giant and cover the southeast portion of the United States. Our expansion started to get a little out of control with Milt running a crew with no experience with operating a show. It would eventually come to a head.

My focus in 1915 was to increase our audience and bring some prestige to the women's title. That was also the year the transcontinental phone line began operation. The previous season we were essentially on our own. We would manage our side of the business and only contact each other if there was an emergency at which point we had to use telegraphs to contact hotels in search of the other crew. With long distance phone lines finally in service through the majority of the country we were in communication with Milt every night. He would book all of our travel, shows, equipment, lodging via telephone and at the end of the night we would give him a call to give him the numbers for his accounting ledger and he would advise us of what was happening the next day.

This made my job easier as I was more focused on the day to day operation of the shows. We ran shows every Thursday through Sunday. I would watch over the concessions, programs, and merchandise. I kept track of the gate and made sure the talent was happy and ready for the show.

On the off days we were usually travelling, Cody and I in our private passenger trains while the rest of the crew was booked in the coach car. It made our business venture a bit more professional although it did eat into the paychecks a bit.

Cody and I were having the time of our lives. Our show had given her some recognition so we were treated a bit more like celebrities most the places we went. At dinner we would have people lined up to hear our stories of travel and triumph. Our reputation was growing with the public,

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but our own employees saw us as a couple of nobles that didn't understand the plight of the daily grind worker bee.

The rest of the crew typically would find food when we would stop and bring it with them. They didn't pack elegant clothes for nights on the train, it was just transportation to them. They also would stay in the hotel most nights unless they were at a saloon. While I was living the high life, seeing plays, hearing symphonies, carriage rides through parks... I also got to know Cody so deeply, her passions in life revolved around experience. She wanted to be knowledgeable on everything and wanted everyone to respect and fear her for what she had accomplished rather than what she looked like.

We wanted to make her as legitimate a champion as we could. We started running main events where she would take on all challengers. I would cruise the crowd during the show looking for hookers or anyone that might be able to get an upper hand on Cody. Inevitably she would take on five to ten random women that thought they could last in the ring with her. Anytime we ran into another female wrestler with any reputation we would offer them a title match with some heavy stipulations. It seemed to work. As we travelled west her reputation preceded our arrival with newspaper articles, posters, and sometimes fans would greet us at the train station hoping to get either a word or an autograph.

A month or so into the season we did a weekend in the Dallas area. I hadn't been in Dallas in five years, but was excited to show Cody around the first town I ever explored. We did a show at some baseball fields near Fair Park on Thursday afternoon and a show on Friday at Gardner Park on the west side of downtown. We would then go to Fort Worth for a show at the Union Stockyards. The end of the weekend was in Denton, where I grew up. The show would be on the lawn of the courthouse and sponsored by the North Texas State Normal College, what today is the University of North Texas.

When we got to Dallas on a Tuesday I wanted to show Cody everything. But, I remember taking a carriage ride from the train depot

to downtown and everything had changed. The hitching posts were gone and replaced with parking spaces. Many of the roads had been paved. The Dallas zoo had opened and to get there you had to cross the world's largest concrete bridge. Sam Freshman's saloon had lost some clientele as the hotels in the area were starting to take over the lodging and drinking businesses. Even the Dixie wasn't what it used to be. When we went by it, it was covered in hand written posters trying to promote every film and event that could be seen there.

I was a bit distraught and realizing the old adage you can never go home again, but Cody was able to pull me out of it. We spent much of that first night reminiscing over what Dallas was years before and looking at the stars while we laid on the roof of the Adolphus hotel.

The show in Denton was almost the opposite feeling. Even though that was where I actually grew up, it was a different lifetime to me. I didn't want to share that world with Cody or anyone for that matter. In the back of my head I was still afraid my parents would show up and drag me back to the ranch. I was young and naïve, my parents did not care that I had left. If anything they would have wanted the money for the horse I stole.

When we got to Denton we had a ring setup in the town square in front of the courthouse. Denton, unlike Dallas hadn't changed much. The opera house on the square was closed and the saloon changed names, but everything was mostly the same. I spent much of the day walking around the square talking to folks getting our picture taken with the School president, William Bruce, and talking to reporters trying to hype up the show and tour.

Shortly after my conversation with the president of Normal College I saw a familiar face. Standing next to a beautiful woman and darling little girl stood Trefor my wrestling partner from before I left home. He was bit thicker than before and the stress of life could be felt from his eyes, but there was also a pride in his stance that made me happy for him.

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I reached out my hand to shake with my old friend, "Well if it isn't Trefor Baker. How are you doing?"

A smile exploded across his face when he realized I recognized him. "I am doing well." He shook my hand with the force of someone trying to prove a point. He then ushered his wife forward. "This is Janet we got married almost three years ago." I politely and daintily took her hand. He then patted the little girl on the top of the head. And this is Darlene.

I knelt down to eye level with the little girl. "And how old are you?" I asked. She looked at and held up three fingers and then quickly hid behind her father. I ignored the obvious connection between their daughter's age and their tenure as a married couple.

"So you did it? You are a big time wrestler." He was smiling and shaking his head as if he couldn't believe it happened.

"Well, it's been a year since I've been in the ring, but I run the shows, manage the crew, supervise ticketing, food, merchandise. I'm somewhat of the general manager of the whole show."

Trefor gave a little frown as he registered what I was telling him, "I thought you'd be a part of the show rather than watching it." He paused for a moment. "But looking at your wardrobe and the size of this crowd you must be doing something right."

"I'm doing ok. But, tell me about married life."

"Oh everything is wonderful. We have a little shotgun house just a couple blocks from the mill, where I work. I take flour from the mill and deliver it to customers." He was plainly not proud of his job, but tried to show enthusiasm while in front of his family. "You know your family is still on the same land, most of your brothers and sisters have married and moved away. I think Suzie and Trent are still at home."

"That is great to hear. Good for them." I had no interest in anything that related to my family. "And, I am happy for you. I would love to introduce you to Cody, but she is getting ready for the show. If

you are free afterwards?” I was truly interested in catching up with the one person in Denton that I missed.

It did not happen. That was the last time I saw Trefor, but I was truly happy that he was out on his own living his own life. His commitment to his daughter and wife started me thinking about me and Cody. We both knew our lives were different than the average American. We had adventures that most people would only dream of and a wealth that put us in a different economic category. Even though I had wanted to marry Ethel and I was just as in love with Cody, the idea of marriage hadn't become something that fit into our conversations. But, there was no reason that I couldn't make the commitment to the love of my life that Trefor had for his.

It would take a few weeks before I found the right time, but it was that night in Denton that I realized I was going to marry Cody. I watched her series of matches that night realizing how incredible a woman she was. I witnessed her accomplish things I did not think any other woman could do.

The proposal wasn't as romantic and perfect as I imagined in my head. It was late at night on our way to Colorado Springs. We were in our private car in the throws of passion pressed up against the glass of the traincar when I blurted out, “I want to marry you!” In my head it would be met with an orgasmic crescendo as she screamed ‘I want to marry you too!’

In reality, my statement pulled her out of any moment she was in. She pushed me off her and stared at me with goofiest of smiles. “Did you just ask me to marry you?”

I was embarrassed at this point and stammering as I tried to cover up my nakedness in order to focus on the conversation.

She immediately grabbed my hands to keep me from hiding my body. “You are the one that wanted to have this conversation. Right this second rather than somewhere, romantic.” She paused, “While we were clothed. So no you get to be uncomfortable.”

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Everything felt like it was careening out of control.

She continued, "I didn't know you wanted marriage."

I looked up and sighed, annoyed how everything was turning out. "I do. I mean, I want to be with you forever. You are the happiest part of my day. You are who I want to wake up to. You are who I want to fall asleep with."

She smiled at my honesty. "I do too. There are times," She motioned to the room and the time we were in at that very moment, "where I would like it if you were a bit more lucid to what romance truly is. But, yes of course I will marry you." She stood back up leaning against the window and pulling me into her body, "I don't need it, but if you want it on paper then lets do it."

We went to the Justice of the Peace in Colorado Springs the next morning and officially connected our lives together. The rest of the tour became our honeymoon we saw the mountains of Utah, the desert of Nevada, and the beautiful coast of California.

Our time of carefree whimsy travelling across the country came to end in Seattle. We had our first show and afterwards Cody and I were headed downtown to catch a play. We had walked a few blocks, but as we turned down a secluded street we found ourselves blocked off from the front and back with a couple of guys brandishing metal pipes.

I had become used to being in danger on occasion. Mostly from being in a match where something had gone wrong, but I was not used to being in danger with my wife. My mentality for the first time switched from fearing for my own safety, to trying to assess how to protect Cody.

All four men started walking towards us. They were cautious and had their weapons lifted, ready to attack. "You know you are in Dr. Jesse Steamer's territory."

Once I heard Steamer's name I relaxed a bit. "We know the doctor. Whatever the issue is I am sure we can work it out." My speech wasn't making them hold back.

“We were told the Dusted Triplets weren’t welcome in the territory until Dr. Steamer got his rematch with Joe Johnson. He was expecting some payback for his Pacific Coast Championship.”

Their words struck home. Joe had been so focused on getting a World Title shot he had left Jesse empty handed for over two years when he was supposed to come back and set up a big money match. I tried to calm the situation, “I got it guys. I will tell Joe and we will get out of your territory.”

As the men came within a few feet of us, “Sorry, we have to make sure the message is heard.” The man closest to me swung his pipe striking hard into my lower ribcage. I crumpled into a ball to receive another strike on my shoulder.

I looked up as the two men passed me by and all four surrounded Cody. I reached my hand out and tried to talk some reason into the men, but just taking a deep enough breath caused a shocking pain to reverberate through my entire right side. My body gave in and I fell to my side. I watched as the men waved their weapons in my wife’s face as they tore her dress open and groped her breasts. One of the men grabbed her around the throat and pulled her in close to him. He licked her face and took a deep breath smelling her hair before he slapped her across the breast and shoved her to the ground. “And don’t forget.” The last one said as he turned back towards us and spit at me.

They did not hurt her, but our bubble of safety was destroyed. My role as the protector had been revoked and life in general suddenly seemed ugly. We spent most of the night at the police station filing a report, but they weren’t interested in helping a couple traveling wrestlers.

We returned to Colorado after that and tried to focus on the winter. After a few weeks we were ok, but we would never feel quite as care free as we did before that incident. Some of it may have been my youth, but largely it was the realization that no matter how much I wanted to protect Cody, it wasn’t something that I could guarantee.

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My mind was constantly concerned with why. Why did it happen. Was God trying to bring my attention to my sins? Was I being punished for the wealth I had built up and flaunted? It was a question that I couldn't resolve. On one hand I wanted to blame Joe, if he had kept his promise I wouldn't have had to deal with Steamer's crew. On the other hand I heard the voice of the old man who sold us the house, "Maybe it was just his vengeance on my sins, but I believe it today."

1916 Season

The incident in Seattle was the beginning of a dark period. Everything seemed to fall apart from that point forward. Returning from the off season I was adamant that Joe return to Seattle and pay off his debt to Steamer. I wanted everyone to understand that what happened was due to our obsessive focus on the World Title and lack of keeping our commitments.

The meeting in Little Rock was starting to feel more like a battle than a planning session. We met at the New Capitol Hotel. Timmy and Milt stayed at Timmy's place which was a beautiful apartment over some shops in downtown. Cody and I paid for one of the nicer suites at the hotel while Joe conserved his money as usual and booked the cheapest rate they had.

The five of us had booked one of the parlors for our meeting to get the 1916 season planned out and underway. Cody and I arrived at the room first somewhat nervous about the meeting. Neither one of us were sure we were ready to get back on the road. Our connection with one another was still damaged by the attack and our excitement to go out

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putting ourselves back in danger was not something we were looking forward to.

Joe arrived shortly after us with a somewhat jolly demeanor, one would expect after a few months off and a morning full of eggs and screwdrivers. We exchanged pleasantries, which quickly turned to discussion of the attack.

When Milt and Timmy arrived we focused on the purpose of the tours for the year. They set up a chalk board they brought with them and started their presentation.

Timmy drew a crude version of the United States on the board. "We think that covering the country in three groups again is the way to go." He started to color the northeast white, the southeast red, and the western half of the United States was blue.

Seeing that they just wanted to keep the status quo, I piped up. "Steamer and his crew are upset! I am not going back to the pacific coast we were warned and I don't want to see what happens."

Milt sat in a chair to the side of the chalk board leaning back into his chair letting his fat build up giving him a second chin, huge gut, and pecs that were near breasts. "We are trying to set things right with Jesse Steamer. Been having trouble getting him on a phone, but we will have it fixed before you get back to the coast."

I gritted my teeth, "I don't think you heard me. I am not going back to the pacific coast. If we are going to tour there, Joe needs to go and fix things."

Joe jumped up from his chair the second I brought his name up. "I am on the verge of getting that title shot, I can't be wasting time on the west coast."

I yelled back, "It's your damn obsession that got my wife and I attacked! You agreed to running a big money match in Steamer's territory."

"And once I get the title I will give him his little match!"

Timmy got in between Joe and I, “Hold on! If Joe thinks he is about to get that title shot I don’t want to waste the last two and half years of progress. How about you and Milt switch tours?” Timmy was looking at me to end this useless arguments. “The west coast is very profitable and Giant won’t let anything happen.”

I leaned back in my chair sulking, “How many men do you think Giant can handle?” The question was rhetorical. Everyone stared at me for a few minutes until I grunted, “Fine.”

I was willing to let Milt deal with Steamer, but I thought it was irresponsible to let Joe continue to work the northeast while we obviously had a business relationship that he needed to mend.

My main concern was Cody and I. This solved any issues I had for our safety, so I dropped it. We finished the meeting and begrudgingly agreed to our tours. Each tour had an operations manager and a creative director. Joe, Giant, and I were all running our respective operations. Cody, Timmy, and Lady were all in charge of stories and promotion. Milt acted as the overall manager handling everyone’s travel, lodging, equipment, and accounting.

My group left Little Rock and headed north to St. Louis from there we would go west to Kansas then south through Texas, back east along the coast. By the end of the summer we would be in southern Virginia and would head back west to finish up the season where Cody and I would head back to Colorado.

Everything broke down in the first weeks of the tour. By the time Joe got to Chicago word had spread that Carl Eadock had defeated John Stanton for the World Championship. The news broke Joe as he had spent more time trying to convince Stanton to give him a shot, than Carl had been wrestling.

From that point forward Joe changed his viewpoint on getting the World Title. He gave up trying to convince the champion to give him a shot and instead would make the public demand he get a shot. The whole slam bang wrestling with people from the tour went out the window and

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Joe became a shoot fighting spectacle. He took on all comers and would no longer work a pre-determined match.

We would get wind from different reporters who had access to distant newspapers of the reports that Joe Johnson had a series of opponents who would be rushed to hospitals after matches. It turned out to largely be hype and promotion, most of his opponents submitted without injury, but the news stories worked as even Cody and I worried about Joe and his temper.

Cody and I returned to our elite lifestyle, but it lacked the passion and fun that we lived it the years before. We were conversing with fans almost out of habit and we would spend less and less time in our room watching the country go by. It was probably partly due to the events in Seattle, but Cody wasn't comfortable with me touching her for most of the season. We both quietly suffered side by side.

Milt's group went straight to Seattle to get things worked out with Steamer as quickly as possible. They were met at the train station with a group of men that were there to inform them all venues they booked from Seattle to San Fransisco had been cancelled and it was important that Joe make his way back to the Pacific Coast.

I was told that Giant departed the train first to show dominance over the group, who readily flashed their firearms which led Giant to re-board the train. Steamer's group had interrupted the first month and a half of Milt's tour and he had to reassess where they were going.

Cody and I had good shows in Kansas City and Topeka. We continued the open challenges to Cody. Out in the Midwest I was very weary about who she took on, but I didn't see any sight of any hookers that were looking to shoot fight with Cody.

When we came into Oklahoma City we were greeted at the train station by Giant and Lady. They told us of the confrontation in Seattle hoping that we could get Joe to find his way to the west coast. They had changed their entire tour and now were looking to bump us farther east so they could have some kind of tour and stay out of Steamer's area.

A phone call that evening that Giant, Lady, Milt, Cody, and I were all crammed around the phone eventually got Joe to head to the northwest. Not the same kind of phone today, but a block phone on the wall of the lobby of the hotel that resembled a face with the two bells above the pole that housed the microphone.

All of us crammed into the corner yelling at the wall must have put a few guests at unease. It was somewhat of a relief as I assumed it would be the beginning of our troubles unwinding.

After the call with Joe and Timmy Milt informed me that he was taking over our booking for the next couple weeks as he was taking Texas and Louisiana while I was to head over to Tennessee and run our tour in reverse. On top of that he expected us to have a joint show in Oklahoma City where we would drop the women's title one of his girls, giving his group a bigger draw.

We yelled back and forth for days as Milt felt that he needed something to draw his crowd, while Cody had proven time and time again that her hard hitting style could awe an audience. We still hadn't come up with a plan by the time the bell rang.

I was standing in Cody's corner and Milt was standing in Harriet Lewis's corner, his star female athlete. We ended up picking a man from the audience to work as the referee as neither one of us would allow the other to have their crew ref the match.

Before the bell went off Cody held up her title belt and asked me what she should do. I leaned in and gave her a kiss while whispering, "Don't let that bitch take your title."

It was the hardest match I had to watch up until that point in my life. Cody was vicious in keeping the girl off her feet and kicking her knees and ankles. Harriet held her own as she was constantly shoving Cody into the corner with constant pressure on her lower abdomen keeping Cody out of breath.

The match only lasted about ten minutes when the referee started looking to the different people around the ring, the timekeeper, the

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announcer, Milt and I. He wasn't sure if what he was seeing was legal. Cody had started applying different leg locks that compromised not only Harriet's lower joints, but would strike her in the throat when she tried to break the holds. On the other side Harriet reverted from the open hand slap that was allowed to scratching with her nails and taking gouges of skin out of Cody's legs and arms. If it weren't for the throat shots Cody would have probably received some permanent scarring on her face as well.

The referee called the bout, disqualified Cody, but it was pretty much a toss up. Cody grabbed the title went to the back refusing to turn it over.

Milt and I came to blows in the back where Giant got between the two of us. He managed to get us all to depart without having to bring the police in.

We headed out to Tennessee while Milt's crew took over our Texas leg. Harriett wouldn't wrestle for a month due to sprains and swelling of her knees and ankles. Cody used the publicity to continue her dominant persona with her open challenges. The challengers seemed to take more caution after the fight in Oklahoma City.

Joe beat every major name he could find as he made his way to Seattle. And once in Seattle he gave Dr. Jesse Steamer the big money match he requested, but left the man in the middle of the ring after a two fall loss in less than a minute.

Joe relinquished his Pacific Coast Title, told Steamer they should be even, and went on to tell the reporters how little he thought of the west coast. Steamer would only have a few more matches after this one, the realization that he wasn't able to hold his own against someone who wanted to shoot on him made him second guess his current life choices.

Eventually, Joe returned to New York where the main promoter for the territory was Jake Shemp. He had started to make a name for himself over the last couple of years booking all matches that Stanton participated in when he was in town.

Jake refused to recognize that Carl had defeated John because he did not have a relationship with the grappler. Rather than lose the ability to book World Title matches Jake ran a new tournament to crown another World Champion. Although this was not endorsed by any of the athletic commissions Jake had enough sway within the wrestling world that people in New York took it as a legitimate tournament.

Timmy had many conversations with Jake over the last couple of years and was able to get both Zonka brothers in the tournament. Wally eventually went over as the new world's champion, but only recognized within New York City. This being the end of the season on the way back west Joe defeated Wally for the title somewhere in Ohio, but outside of Jake Shemp's influence no one recognized it as a legitimate title. Instead, Joe was becoming more and more of a joke and a bully.

We ended the season and Cody and I returned to our home. Once again the majesty of the mountains did not continue to hold our attention. The magic of the off season seemed to have dwindled away and we were left with a hollow home out in the cold of the Colorado winter.

We tried to get out more. We spent more time driving around, but the car had some mechanical issues since it wasn't used during half the year. We would go into Longmont and talk to the locals, but we had created a sort of reputation for being an uppity couple. We were considered famous and not real welcome in the blue collar type of establishments. As usual much of the time was working on the house, but it wasn't filled with passion and love, Cody and I had let fear overtake us and we weren't sure how to be together anymore.

I know I prayed that winter. I prayed that I would reconnect with my wife. I prayed that I would have all the time to learn who she was again. I specifically remember asking God that if she had changed to let me meet who she had changed into.

The Fall from Grace

The 1917 Little Rock meeting was a chance for us all to get back on the bandwagon. The decision had been made before we got there, it was most likely made sometime during the previous season, but 1917 would see the Dusted Triplets return to a single tour schedule. We would no longer break into groups and separate across the country. We also would change our show schedules to run shows in small towns around a large city for a couple weeks to build interest and some press, then we would finish it off with a huge show in the city.

The plan was to head back towards Boston where Carl Eadock was keeping a home base. We didn't even get close. Our third stop was the Chicago area. We had three weeks of shows around Chicago with an attempt at selling out a ball park for the big blow off. During our second week we got word that Carl Eadock dropped the title back to John Stanton.

It turned out that Carl was drafted into the Great War. It wasn't a common issue with the wrestling community as we were largely gypsies, nomads, and travelers. On registration day all eligible men were to report to their local courthouse where they were to put down their information. City clerks would go around and interview citizens relying on them to

squeal on one another and then mark them as deserters or get them to register on the next registration date. As wrestlers we were often in and out of towns without knowing many people, so the majority of us didn't even bother registering.

I was too young for the draft in the first World War. In the second World War I was considered older, not too old, but no one was throwing me in jail as a deserter at that point in my life.

Joe's reputation for defeating everyone that stood in his way was starting to gain traction in the media. Stanton was being asked on a regular occasion when he would put the title on the line against Joe even so much as for one reporter to claim to John's face that Joe was the superior athlete.

We wanted to be in the right area so when John Stanton gave in we would be able to get a signed fight quickly. Because of this we tried to not get too far away too quickly. We did a few unexpected weeks in Indianapolis, then went on a tour of Ohio hitting up Cincinnati, Columbus, then Cleveland.

Milt and I were not seeing eye to eye. Even though between all the members of the crew he and I were the only ones that spent the money to live in luxury while on the road. When we arrived in Cleveland and stopped at the front desk of the Hollenden Hotel we fought over who would get the penthouse suite. I ended up winning as the hotel manager looked at Milt and asked how he could deny a nice little lady like Cody the opportunity to enjoy a private bathtub. This was a luxury in the early nineteen hundreds as the hotels that had added indoor plumbing typically added one bathroom per floor.

We squabbled over everything. We fought for dinner reservations, play tickets, matches we controlled, who handed out paychecks... The fight between us from the season before leaving one of his star women injured for a few months still sat wrong with all of us. I still could not believe he wanted us to drop the title to his wrestler or that he overtook part of our tour. I could see his side also, but I refused at the time. It may have just been youthful pride, but I wanted to hate the man.

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It is funny how over time you forgive people of their misdoings. I think it largely has to do with realizing your own mistakes and what you did to contribute to the issue. Milt and I were so angry with one another and we were so focused on the World Title, that I didn't accurately identify the climate as it actually was. I had become comfortable with the Dr. Jesse Steamer situation not realizing that Joe had already effectively ended the man's career.

The night of the big money blow off show for Cleveland we were frantically looking for Stanton. We knew he was in town, but seemed to want to stay hidden so we were all on the lookout for him.

I remember sitting ringside when Joe came out. He walked down the aisle slowly to create the awe of the most massive fighter he could. He slowly stepped in the ring. The man next to me shouted, "Saw Stanton at the Harbor Inn. Says he is here to kick your ass."

As soon as I heard this I got out of my chair and ran to the back. I found Timmy and told him what I heard. Joe also caught the message and was in the ring giving a relentless beating to some local grappler that wanted to meet Joe's challenge.

Timmy and I frantically looked through maps trying to find the Harbor Inn. We couldn't find it and started asking people in the back of the crowd where it was.

Giant overheard our conversations and was starting to get the crew hyped up to go find Stanton and his men. I didn't realize it in the moment, but there was no looking for a wrestling match that afternoon. There was a gang fight brewing after the wrestling match.

I had given up my post and become obsessed with figuring out where the pub was, who was going, what kind of legal trouble I was about to be apart of. I asked Timmy to have someone take over my post for the rest of the show meaning that someone needed to act as security, watch for anyone trying to skip the gate late in the show, and watch for grapplers looking to shoot on our talent.

Milt took over for me. Had I realized this I might have dropped everything to get back to my post, but I was not aware of what was happening. I had one hand on each of the Zonka brother's shoulders discussing who would stick with who if we found Stanton, when I heard a stomach curdling scream come from the gymnasium.

I turned and sprinted to the ring knowing that scream came from Cody. By the time I got there a referee and Milt were trying to pry a woman off of Cody. She had my wife pinned to the ground on her back. One shin was pressed against Cody's chest holding her down, the other shin was against Cody's right thigh pinning the leg to the mat. The woman had pulled my wife's leg backwards, hyperextending her knee until it snapped. The crowd was starting to get uncomfortable and you could see some men preparing to get in the ring and save Cody who was always billed to be the villain.

It is the only time in my life I remember hitting a woman out of vengeance. I would have murdered the woman if the people in the room would've let me. But I slid into the ring and jumped to my feet. Running full speed at the woman who was wrenching and tearing at my defenseless love's leg. She looked up and smiled a soul crushing smile as I watched my knee strike her face. She immediately was knocked out. Her grip instinctively let go and as I turned my body to see how Cody was doing I watched her leg fall to the mat, her knee bending at a ninety degree angle and lie lifeless in the ring as she screamed from the severe pain.

I hit the mat and bounced back to my feet. I saw the unconscious woman laying on the mat. I lifted my right foot prepared to stomp down with all my force on her skull, but the referee got in between me and the woman taking me down with a single leg takedown.

Once I hit the mat my focus moved to Cody. I no longer was concerned with the woman who was obviously sent to maim my wife. I just wanted to end Cody's pain. I cradled her head as she grunted and screamed from the shock. I tried to tell her it was alright, that we would fix things. But, I still wasn't twenty years old. I had no idea how to deal

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with an emergency like that. I ended up sitting in the ring with my wife crying with her, apologizing to her, holding her so tight to try and transfer her pain to me.

There was an ambulance at the building within ten minutes. Someone had found a phone and called in the incident. They took her to the local hospital. I was told I couldn't ride with them, so I literally jumped on the back of the ambulance car and rode on the outside for the six block journey to the hospital.

Medical attention in 1917 was not the same as it is today. Hospital's were more triage where you had a big room, one that had once been a ballroom or gymnasium with dozens of beds set up. The doctor would go from bed to bed working with patients. The frustrating parts were the lack of sympathy. They didn't administer pain killers regularly. They gave out pain killers almost as a way of dealing with the loudest patients as opposed to those in most need. They also didn't tell you what was happening. Doctors back then had an attitude that they knew better and they didn't need to confuse a patient with complicated medical talk.

I spent hours in that hospital. I watched the doctor reset Cody's knee. The sounds of the snap mixed with her cries do to other broken bones and all the muscle and tendon tears still haunt my ears today. This was the shriek that finally got the doctor to administer morphine for the pain. She ended up with a cast which took six hours to place and dry and was told to rest it for the next year.

I did not even try and explain things to Joe, Timmy, and Milt. I took my wife directly to the train station where I booked us a trip home. As much as I hated the fact that she was injured the ride home was the most connection we had made in a year. She couldn't be up and about the train so I waited on her and brought her dinner. We watched the country go by while I held her in my arms. And a few times I even invited some fans of ours to come back to our room to hear our stories.

Once we were back in Colorado the phone company had expanded to where our home was and I could call the boys on the road. It took me

a while to find them, but I eventually found they had made their way to New York City.

Cody's attacker was one of Steamer's women wrestlers. She had lost her place in his company because he was shutting things down and she wanted revenge on the group that ended his confidence. I would blame Milt for many years, but eventually I would realize that I was the main person to blame.

The crew had met up with Stanton behind the Harbor Inn. There was a big brawl that landed everyone in jail, but Joe got John Stanton to grant him a World Title match. It was in return for him to let go from a choke hold that he had him in. From the description I got most of the talent in the Dusted Triplets were minutes away from homicide and spending the rest of their lives in jail.

Rest and Relaxation

My life changed immediately. I wasn't involved in the wrestling business at all for the next couple of years. I received our pay for what we contributed in the 1917 season, but I wouldn't hit the road again until 1921.

When Cody was in the hospital I wanted nothing but to make her pain go away. It eventually happened with Morphine. When we got back to Colorado we had weekly visits from our doctor at home who tried his best to continue to help Cody not have to wallow in pain.

Intravenous drugs were not very common especially outside of the hospital setting. He was trying to give her some other options. Those first few weeks he had given her some opium gum. Not gum like we think of it, more like the inner part of a tree branch.

Spending time with her for those first few months was awful as she did not want to be a person. She wanted to walk, she wanted to wrestle, she did not want to exist without those things. I spent most of my time trying to make her more comfortable. I would spend most mornings making a big breakfast. I would make eggs, bacon, biscuits, and sometimes pancakes. I would bring it to Cody in bed. We would eat our

breakfasts in bed and watch the prairie dogs or deer scamper around outside the window depending on the time of year.

I would then get the morning paper and read to Cody. I would let her know what was going on in the world in everything except wrestling. She did not want to know anything about wrestling. She saw it as the thing that took everything from her.

I would then give her an allowance of opium gum find out if she needed anything from the market or the store. I would take the car and go pick up a small amount of groceries from the market and whatever supplies we were running low on from the general store down the street.

Longmont had grown quite a bit over the few years we had the house. It wasn't something that we got to watch happen as we were out touring the country. Instead, when we returned with Cody's injury we noticed that it was only a few miles to the next house. There were ranches that had popped up on the edge of the city. Just driving through town you started to see a bit of the hustle and bustle of a normal city.

I still was not well liked in town. I think most of the locals wanted me to go down to Denver where the other rich folk were, but I wasn't bringing in any money any more. I did not know how long I would be in Colorado and did not have the luxury of spending the amount of money it would take to move.

My days at the market were received with sideways stares and hushed whispers. But, it did not bother me. I had made a living by marketing people's hatred of certain characters, I could deal with being such a character for a while.

Some days I would go to the book store and try and find something that could get her mind off her leg. The bookstore owner was one of the few people in Longmont that seemed to appreciate my citizenry. He would ask me about the house and if I had a chance to make it into the mountains. It was the same conversation each time, but I didn't mind. There is a sort of courtesy you develop when speaking with elderly people and a part of

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that courtesy is to show them the same enthusiasm each time you re-hear their stories.

I would return to the house to find Cody inevitably staring at the mountains either from our porch or from one of the living room windows. It tore me apart to see the yearning for adventure in her eyes. I would end up coming home and bringing her inside and make her dinner.

Sometimes she would sit on our sofa and watch me cook, sometimes she would read, but most days she wanted to hear my story of going into town. I hated telling it because it never changed. Every day I would tell her about the people's stares, the freshness of the produce, and the same story of the old man at the book store.

Then we would eat dinner and lie in bed while she cried herself to sleep. It was a depressing existence. But after the third week back at home the doctor had some concerns.

It was a Thursday, I had made breakfast and read Cody as much of the paper as she was interested in. The doctor knocked on the door as he walked in, we had become fairly comfortable with one another.

"Morning Mr. and Mrs. Malone." He hung his hat on our coat rack as he removed his overcoat and made his way to the back of the house where the bedroom was.

"Another week, but I don't think there is much progress." I wanted to clue him in on her unhappiness.

He walked over to the bed while I took our dishes back to the kitchen. He sat bedside with Cody running through his normal routine, temperature, blood pressure, checking the heart, lungs, and joints. "How is the leg feeling?"

Cody just looked out the window at the flat boringness of eastern Colorado. "Hurts. Hasn't stopped hurting since it happened." Her voice was cold and slow. There was no enjoyment in her life at this point.

He got up and pulled back the covers to look at her injured leg while I returned to the doorjamb to watch the appointment. The exposed casted leg looked as it always had to me. It was a solid from her ankles to

just above her knee. The doctor's reaction was different than mine. He paused almost immediately as he held both hands out in front of him in caution.

"I don't want to alarm you, but I am going to have to remove this cast." He was looking over at Cody who didn't seem to recognize what he was telling her. "Hopefully we caught it quick enough, but I am sure there is an infection under there. It's faint, but I can smell the infection."

He jumped to his feet to go fetch his bag of tools from his car. I swooped into the room to hold Cody, to comfort her. But even my presence didn't make her sway at all. She was numb to the idea that something else was wrong. She wanted nothing more than to have the whole ordeal be over.

When the doctor returned he had a thick pair of cutting shears. He recruited my help to get Cody over to the bath tub. He said that we would need some sanitized water so I went out started collecting snow to put on the stove. Cody sat on the edge of the clawfoot tub we had in our bedroom while I frantically tried to get whatever the doctor needed.

The process was slow as the cast was very hard and each cut only went about an eighth of an inch. He was as gentle as he could be, not wanting to adjust the broken bone or irritate the infection he suspected was growing inside the cast.

Over the course of an hour or more I am at the side of the tub with rags and pots of boiled snow. The doctor is trying desperately to keep the leg stable while he identifies different parts of the leg that were punctured from the drying of the cast. These puncture wounds largely are black and green with scabs.

Once he had everything identified and exposed he looked at my wife, "Cody, I am sorry, but I have to clean these spots on your leg. It is going to hurt, but if I don't there is a real possibility you will lose the leg eventually." He paused waiting for a response, but he received nothing but a silent tear.

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As much as I wanted to hold my wife and help her through the pain I was the only other helper for the doctor. I sat on the floor beside the tub helping his cleanout rags as he tore at the sores on her leg, tearing the scabs off and scrubbing the wounds clean of any visible infection.

It was an agonizing couple of hours that Cody endured with no words. In the end her body was shaking from the exhaustion of keeping herself propped up on the side of the tub and the pain of cleanings. Afterwards he gently applied a splint to her leg not wanting to suffocate the wounds that he had just cleaned.

In the end he helped her back to the bed where I sat next to her, running my fingers through her hair. I felt like a failure as a husband. Her life was continually getting worse and I had no ability to curb the impacts.

Before he left the doctor handed Cody a bottle of brown liquid. "This won't be as strong as the opium gum, but if you take a couple tablespoons in the morning and evening it should fix most of the pain. Plus it'll help if you develop a cough." He tipped his hat as he made his way out of our house.

I remember looking at the bottle thinking that I was sad for Cody that her pain seemed to be building and they were reducing the pain relief. The bottle was a dark bottle with a white label. It was a Bayer branded bottle of Heroin dough syrup.

Today that sounds ludicrous, but it was medication. We didn't know of the dangers of it yet. In the small amounts that it was intended to be taken it was perfectly safe. We assumed it was a good option to handle Cody's pain. We found out we could order it from the Sears Roebuck catalogue and did so both in syrups as well as pressed tablets.

Life remained that way for nearly a year. I saw my first Colorado summer but it was filled with pain and depression. I watched the snow melt off the mountains and the fields fill with wildflowers.

I watched our yard fill with prairie dogs and their strange yips while I continued to try my best to bring my wife out of her depression. I think I fell a bit into a depression as well. It was the first time in my life where

I wanted to go and experience, but my commitments were holding me back.

In late 1918, a year after we had left the tour her healing had finally left her in a position where she could walk. The lack of cast left her healing odd and she did not have the same range of motion she did beforehand. Whether we wanted to speak about it or not, her wrestling career was most likely over.

By this time our money was starting to thin, not painfully, but noticeably. We started going out of the house a bit. She would come to the market and walk around a little. We attended a couple of operas and even a few movies in downtown Denver.

It all became an excuse for her to take more Heroin. She already started the day with swig of the syrup, she would take a tab whenever we went out. After a few hours of being out she claimed she needed another tablet and then would have another swig of the syrup before bed.

I was perfectly willing to let her medicate her pain, but I was kidding myself if I believed that was what she was doing. It was obvious she was addicted. The vacant look in her eyes that came about with the injury did not leave once she was healed. Instead her eyes would hide pain and sadness. Taking the Heroin brought the vacant look back.

1919 was the year I tried to get back to promoting wrestling. That March I talked to Cody about going and training some, possibly getting back in the ring, but she took offense and walked away overemphasizing her recently acquired limp.

I had been keeping up with what was happening in the wrestling world through the newspaper and letters from the boys. Over the previous year John Stanton agreed to a match with Joe. They agreed on Madison Square Garden as the perfect place to maximize the money. This brought Jake Shemp into the negotiations for the match. He had a good handle on all venues and matches within the New York area.

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Shemp did not want to see Joe versus Stanton. He still looked at Wally Zonka as his local World Champion and would rather see Wally take on Stanton. Joe tried to protest, but Shemp wouldn't have it.

They ended up with time limit draw. Shemp continued to recognize Wally as champ while Stanton went back to the Midwest still claiming to be the champion. Joe and Wally would trade the title back and forth for the next two years until Joe got the best of Wally in Kentucky in 1919.

We went to a local match around this same time. We sat in the front row and watched as a couple of amateur grapplers fumbled around the ring with one another. The show was nothing as interesting as our slam bang wrestling.

The show made me want to get back out there and build better stories than the current promoters were doing. But Cody didn't find the same passion from watching the show. She instead felt attacked and belittled by taking her to the one thing she couldn't do anymore, because it was taken from her.

We didn't speak for about a month after that incident. I strayed from the wrestling world trying to keep my marriage as happy as I could. I tried my hands at promoting other events. I held a ball that Cody refused to dance at, a premiere of a new play that flopped, and even a couple charity events for local politicians that turned out to be a waste of time for everyone involved.

Each time I would find a new thing to promote Cody would explain to me how miserable she was and how me being gone was going to make things worse for her. Her problem was growing worse. It was hard not to notice at this point, we were getting pretty large shipments of Heroin from the Sears Roebuck people and I would find multiple empty bottles each day hidden in different places. Sometimes they would be buried in the yard, sometime they stored extra bacon grease.

Eventually, I couldn't ignore what was happening any more. I took Cody with me to a new movie in late 1919. We went to downtown Denver

to see the Virtuous Vamp. I thought a light hearted comedy may raise her spirits, but it was to no avail. She sat in the theatre in silence reading the words to herself while waiting for the whole thing to end so she could go wallow in her self loathing while getting a bit of shut eye.

After the film I led her to the car and drove south instead of north where Longmont was. She never asked me what we were doing or going. I assume now that she knew what was happening and was accepting her fate.

We pulled through the darkened streets of that Colorado town until we came upon a large house with big ornate doors and signs with flowers. There was a sign that hung over the door that read, 'Morphine Maintenance Clinic'.

Cody looked out the window of the car understanding what was happening. She did not get angry with me, she did not question me, she just nodded and took a deep breath preparing for what was about to happen.

I parked the car and got out into the cold Colorado night and walked around the front of the car to open Cody's door. She got out and straightened her dress before she walked up to the door and stepped inside.

I followed her relieved that she wasn't screaming and pleading. There were a lot of stories about addiction back then and they typically ended in being committed to some sort of hospital where they are restrained and forced into submission. I guess that wasn't Cody's style. She talked to the receptionist and gave the woman her name. The woman asked Cody and I to sit and a doctor would be along shortly to admit her.

Our relationship had struggled so much over the last couple of years that I expected to not speak to her that day. I was hopeful that she would want to talk after they broke her of her addiction.

To my surprise a few moments before the doctor appeared she turned to me and leaned in real close. "I know you have done everything you can for me. I am sorry I haven't been more grateful." I looked into her eyes and saw a twinge of love and passion that I had missed in her for

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so long. "I promise I will do what I need to get better." We kissed creating a connection with one another that we had longed for.

When our lips parted the doctor was standing there with a smile on his face. He was a small old man who had lost all his hair many years ago. His ball nose and wrinkly face reminded me of a character from Gasoline Alley. His voice quivered as he spoke to the both of us, "Welcome Mrs. Malone. I want to assure the both of you that we are here to rid you of your addiction and get you back to the life you want to live."

Tears started to form in my eyes, "I think I mentioned it on the phone, but her addiction is to Heroin, not morphine..." I trailed off hoping the doctor would finish the question for me.

"Yes. We treat addiction here. I know it says morphine on the door, but we handle opium, cocaine, amphetamine, cannabis. It isn't about the drug it is about the behavior. We will keep her safe and follow all legal protocols. She should be home by summer if all goes well." He spoke the words more like a prepared speech than an answer to my question.

Cody and I had one last deep embrace and then she walked to the back of the hospital with the little old man. And that was the last I saw or heard from my wife for a long time.

Joe Gets to the Top of the Game

I spent a lot of time alone over the next few months. It was cathartic in a way. I had spent the last couple years trying to bring Cody out of her shell that I now felt alone. Now I was alone and everything I did was for me.

That Christmas going into the 1920 new year I bought myself a radio. It was a way to bring entertainment to your house. It was amazing. I was instantly informed on the news of the day, major sporting events, and entertainment almost like someone coming to my house to tell me stories.

Cody had been in the facility for about a month. I was not allowed to see or talk to her. I had no idea of what was happening within those walls. I hoped that she was getting help and that she would come back as the wife I fell in love with.

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It was mid day on a Saturday in January when the radio station started to broadcast the event that I had been waiting for all week. I had truly been waiting for this event for years.

It was the World Championship match between John Stanton and Joe Johnson. They were meeting in Nebraska during the off season. The wrestling industry had taken a bit of a hit since World War I. Even though the war had effectively been over for just more than a year, soldiers didn't start coming home until late summer of 1919. With the population of men greatly decreased for the previous few years the demand for wrestling was down. They needed a big money match that would draw interest for all the men returning home.

I was glued to my radio for the entire four hours of the match. The announcer gave a blow by blow portrayal of the action. I envisioned it in my head with such glee as I knew my friend was finally getting his chance to become the World Champion. The story was straight forward, Stanton was trying to mat wrestle with Joe, but Joe's brute force kept him on top. Every time Stanton made a move Joe would put on one of his vice grips putting Stanton on the brink of submission.

I think the next house a few miles down the road heard my scream when the announcer said "Joe Johnson is applying as much pressure as he can, but John Stanton has thrown Johnson off balance. That is it folks. The referee has tapped Johnson on the back. John Stanton retains his title."

My heart sank as I knew that all of Joe's dreams were just destroyed after one of the longest fights I had ever partially witnessed. I waited around a few hours until I was pretty sure Joe and Timmy would be back at their hotel and started calling around to hotels in Omaha trying to find the boys.

After four attempts I finally found the place they were staying. It took five minutes to get Joe on the phone, but when he did it wasn't the down and distraught man I was expecting.

“This is Joe Johnson.” The voice on the other end was calm and secure.

“Joe, it’s Squirt. I heard the match on the radio.” I tried to sound sympathetic.

“How did it go over on the radio? It was perfect in the armory, we had them eating out of our hands. And the amount of booze we sold over the four hours, we made a killing.”

Hearing Joe talk about the business side of the wrestling world confused me at first, but I realized that he must be evolving, possibly taking over some of my duties since I was gone. “It was great I was on the edge of my seat the entire time.” I paused trying to figure out how to ask Joe about not being upset without upsetting him. “I kind of expected you to be mad you didn’t win.”

Joe laughed into the phone, “Have you forgot everything Squirt? This is just the match to build the interest in the rematch. We are using the Gottlieb and Stepanchikov feud for our basic outline. We will have a rematch at the end of the season.”

I was shocked but impressed. Somehow Timmy and Milt had been able to get Joe to care more about the long term business than whether or not he was the champion. “Congratulations Joe.”

“Thanks.” There was a small pause, “Squirt?”

“I’m here.”

“You coming back on the road with us?” It was an oddly vulnerable moment for such a huge burly man.

“I don’t know Joe. Cody still can’t wrestle and I can’t leave her alone right now.”

“Take care Squirt.”

We hung up the phones.

I spent much of the next few months falling back in love with grappling. I would go watch it downtown when I could, but mostly I followed it on the radio. I planned my trips to the market, my household chores, and my meals around the matches that broadcast on the radio.

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I would not see Cody again until almost August. I knew nothing of her rehabilitation. I would not get details on the insanity that happened in that facility for years to come.

Eventually, I would learn that she was taken off her drugs cold turkey and she would spend many nights screaming in agony pleading to get some help. Her screams and cries were rarely answered and when they were it was with a punch to the gut or a backhand to the face.

The people who were admitted had a sort of comradery based on the horrible situations they had to deal with. The people she would meet in there would be her friends on the outside and the vast majority of them were never going to break their habits.

She spent nearly nine months in that half prison half hospital where she was yelled at and degraded on a regular basis. They refused to believe that anyone had beaten their addiction and until I would come and inquire she was committed with no way of escape.

During that time in the United States there was what we called the Opium Crisis. Many women were addicted to opium, heroin, or morphine. It was largely because menstrual cramps were often treated with these addictive drugs. Once women were hooked on them there was little help to get them off. They either had to figure it out on their own or end up in a treatment facility like Cody.

The belief at the time was that addiction was a genetic defect and those who had problems with it would birth children with problem with it. These beliefs led to laws all across the country that forced sterilization on women who were addicted to medications.

Not only did Cody endure months of withdrawal pains, mental and physical abuse, but she had been forced sterilized while she was committed.

I picked her up in late August after deciding that she must have beaten her addiction by that time. I showed up and signed her out and within minutes she was in my arms.

I took her home and pampered her for the next few days. It was the same routine as before, but this time it was to make her life easy, to make her happy, to let her know how much I missed her as opposed to the necessity of before.

We had the breakfasts in bed, the reading of the newspaper, I would take her to the market and pick out our dinner. And, at night we would lie in each other's arms while we listened to the radio.

She never once told me of anything bad about the morphine maintenance clinic. From what she told me it was months of healthy food, good conversation, and general support. But, no matter how many times she told me it was obvious that she was happy to be back home.

I took everything for granted. She was secretly depressed about no longer being able to have children. She was still taking heroin multiple times a day, but I had a blissful ignorance to it. I chose not to see what was happening. She was giving me the happy wife I had been pleading for and that was enough for me to not want to rock the boat.

After a couple of months I started to meet some of the other from the rehab hospital. They did not seem as well put together as Cody, but I brushed it off. They all had a common link and were bonded because of it. Of course in reality they were enabling one another.

In late November we received a visit from a rather unlikeable man. His name was Mr. Zinch. A short but lanky man with such a full head of dark hair that he had trouble putting on a hat. But, when he showed up he was wearing one, sitting atop his mass of hair instead of around it.

Mr. Zinch was an agent from the Internal Revenue Service. He had shown up to inform us that the United States had passed an income tax in 1913. Although I was young and uninformed these were not excuses for the man.

He had hundreds of papers and documents to explain to me that the country believed that we were bringing in a lot of money with the purchases we had made. I don't know if they were right, I hadn't really kept up with how much money we were making. But in the end we owed

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the country something in the neighborhood of twenty thousand dollars. Had this news come two years prior I would have had the money, but we had not had any actual income in years at this point. We did not have the means to pay this sort of bill.

I remember that night running around our house playing a childish game of naked tag with the bill that Mr. Zinch left for us. The game was thrilling and depressing all at once. I chased Cody around the house, her movement had got significantly better, she still had a limp, but it did not keep her from running. As I passed through the living room I could feel the warmth of the fire against my skin, but going into our bedroom, the chill from our window gave me a sort of chilled rush.

I remember meeting up with Cody in the kitchen and bopping her on the bottom with the tax bill. "You are it!" I said as I started to run away from her.

She chased after me waving the paper wildly in the air. Starting to run out of breath she panted behind me, "I don't think we should pay it." She stopped by the fireplace and pretended to throw it in. She knew that I was concerned with the situation and used it as a chance to taunt me.

I turned around not wanting to go to jail because my wife thought it would be funny to burn our tax bill. When she saw me coming she returned to running. This time she went to the kitchen and pretended like she was going to throw it in the garbage can. I chased her down and she turned back to the front room. As I turned the corner I saw her with the door open. The moonlight shone across her perfect naked body with small wisps of snow wafting like dust at her feet.

She looked me straight in the eye with evil on her mind, "If you want it so bad." She tossed the bill out the front door. It flipped and twisted in the gentle breeze and landed in our snow covered yard about fifteen feet off the front porch.

I darted out the door with only saving the bill on my mind. I leapt from the porch to the yard landing in the cold powdery snow. The landing

was hard enough that my bare butt hit the top layer of snow reminding me both that I was suddenly cold and that I was very naked.

I grabbed the paper and turned to run back in the house to realize that Cody had shut and locked the door. I stood exposed on our porch pouting to my wife who slowly laid down next to our fireplace loudly exclaiming how nice and warm she was.

Memories like this are strange. There was nothing significant about that night. We made no big plans, we broke no new ground, but it sticks out in mind as one of those days that I will always cherish.

Within a few weeks we had decided I needed to get back on the road with the Dusted Triplets and get our financial problems fixed. It was late December when I had Cody take me to the train station. She would stay home and keep the homestead in good shape while I earned a small fortune.

At the train station I told her my goodbyes. I told her I was happy she had come back to me. I don't know if she understood what I meant, but she accepted the sentiment regardless. We hugged, we kissed, I left towards Omaha.

Timmy, Milt, and Joe were all happy to let me back into the fold. That first night I got there was the rematch between Joe and John Stanton. Although, they didn't draw a crowd like the 1911 re-match between Gottlieb and Stepanchikov the plan definitely worked.

The hype for the fight was crazy. They had press there and people waiting to interview the competitors. There were autograph signings and programs and food and massive amounts of alcohol. The money flowing at the event reminded me of what it was like before everything started to fall apart.

Joe ended up winning the title that night. He had finally made it to the top of the heap. Stanton was not happy about the loss, but he knew that the money was there mostly for Joe. Even though he was the World Champion he couldn't draw what Joe The Strangler Johnson could.

The Frenchman

The wrestling world had changed a bit. The Dusted Triplets no longer could roam the country. The rise of the territory booker had happened over the last couple of years, so there were few places we could go and wrestle with having to either answer to another promoter's plans or paying someone off for putting on a show in his territory. Because of the lack of travel the off season was no longer a thing.

We were stuck largely in the Midwest. Tornado alley from Oklahoma up north to North Dakota, over to Iowa and back south through Missouri and Arkansas. That was the area that lacked a promoter. We also had free reign in the New York area because Jake Shemp liked us and allowed us to work shows in his territory without fear of repercussion.

After the first night when Joe won the title the boys gave me a cut even though I really had nothing to do with that show. I was beyond grateful and put aside two hundred for my travels and three hundred was shipped back to Cody, pony express.

One of the biggest welcome backs I got was from Giant. He saw me boarding the train and he rumbled over to me and gave me a big bear

hug. It wasn't tight, but he had a way of making things not hurt while you were still completely incapacitated.

It was a sad sight. Giant was not doing well. He suffered from Acromegaly. Often times this is referred to as gigantism. It is a disease where a person's body never stops growing. They become very tall, very large and eventually their organs give up due to becoming oversized and unable to function.

Giant was larger than I remembered. He couldn't move very well and his legs had bowed significantly. Once he let go of me he was winded and needed to take a minute to compose himself.

Lady was still with him traveling by his side and trying to take care of him, but she was no match for his genetic disease. She tried to make him comfortable, but she knew as well as anyone else that he wouldn't be around forever.

The crew had become a little bloated. Timmy, Joe, Milt, and I were all splitting the booking fees. We had fifteen male wrestlers that could double as a referee and six female wrestlers that spent less time wrestling and more time accompanying the men out to the ring. My first show back where I had input was in Des Moines Iowa. It was a smaller show, but the draw of the World Title made sure our gate was always higher than expected.

Most of the show and promotion was set around Joe and his new moniker, The Strangler. Joe had perfected the sleeper hold which was a reverse facelock that cut off the blood to the head. When performed correctly it could make a man pass out, but it gave the appearance of strangling someone unconscious.

When we got around to the show and I watched the matches they were putting on I was appalled. They had taken the idea of slam bang wrestling to an extreme. There were almost no grapples, no combinations, no reversals. It was mostly throw after throw. I watched as two of the men on our crew ran into one another's hip toss. They didn't pretend to protect themselves from the move, they just walked into it. They did the

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same with a suplex where they jumped to get enough height to go over. Then at the end of the bout they traded closed fist strikes without dodging or protecting themselves in any way.

After the show I pulled Joe and Timmy aside and questioned their logic. "What the hell was that?"

Joe looked at me sideways unsure of why I was upset. "It's slam bang wrestling."

"No. It is over the top stupidity. How did anyone in the audience believe that was real? We have people throwing punches and not protecting themselves or fighting back." I was livid. The idea that the majority of our sport was predetermined could not get out. It would destroy the credibility of all the athletes. It was sink our ability to draw a crowd. I could not believe they had let this happen.

"It's the style now." Timmy jumped into the conversation. "It started in California and has spread out this way. The territories in Canada and Texas and the northeast haven't adopted it yet, but I think they will. It draws a better crowd." Timmy had been so gradually exposed to the new style he didn't see the holes in it.

I tried to get the crew to work more shoot fights to build the realism back, but no one wanted to listen to me anymore. I had been gone for too long. Instead I was collecting a paycheck out of pity more so than anything else.

I continued to send home as much of my pay as possible. I spoke to Cody a few times on the phone, but she did not like the contraption. She preferred to send letters, so most of our correspondence was done that way. I would come into a town pick up a letter from her that was usually waiting for me at the hotel and write her a letter in return. Then I worked on the shows for the next couple of days just to pack up and do it all again the next week.

As we ventured into the south Joe's popularity waned. His reputation as The Strangler was starting to eat into people's interest in

paying to see him. As much as we could build him up as a monster people wanted to see heroes defeating monsters not the other way around.

I had come up with a few different ideas on how to build up more interest. My focus was on bringing back the realism to the show so I pitched the idea to the rest of the guys of having Joe take on an Olympic champion. It was something that Joe, Milt, and Timmy were interested in.

There was a bit of a ground swell of unhappiness among the other wrestlers. Although they would benefit on the mid card with having an Olympian on the show they did not appreciate someone from the outside getting a title shot.

Milt spent some time and money trying to get Jacques Dubois the most recent gold medalist in Greco-Roman wrestling to come to the states.

During this time we had shows in Kansas City, St. Louis, and Springfield. As always I got my letter from Cody explaining to me that she was doing fine. She talked about the flowers blooming, the people at the market, the old man at the books store and his same old story. It was my one piece of life that told me I had something to return to. As much as wrestling had become my life over the last decade, there was nothing in it that held me there. It was my way to make money and that was it at that point.

Sometime in early April we had Jacques Dubois in town for a match against the World Champion. It was a huge success from a financial stand point. We had the world's toughest, meanest, cut throat, killer of a wrestler taking on the most skilled grappler in the world.

We pulled out all the stops with the media and merchandise. It was going to be a huge money maker no matter what.

The match was set to take place at the Oklahoma City fairgrounds. Timmy and I met with Jacques people before the match. We explained to them that Joe was going to be winning the match, but to keep it off Jacques record he could claim foul play somehow. According to our original agreement to get them all the way out to the United States we gave them an advance of two thousand dollars. It was only part of what they would

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end up with at the end of the event after food and alcohol sales would total everything up.

The rest of that day we tried to goad the press into writing stories that might travel farther than the local paper. We had radio coverage for most of the states in the union. Late in the afternoon when it was time to have the match I realized that the men we discussed everything with weren't the men accompanying Jacques to the ring.

When Joe made his way out, we warned him that Jacques manager didn't appear to be around. He understood and when he got to the ring he walked over to Jacques and quietly where no one could hear him he said, "You have the plan down?"

Jacques Dubois looked at Joe and smiled, "Je suis desole je ne parle pas anglais."

"I'm going to assume that means I have fight ahead of me." He turned to go back to his corner.

Jacques shouted to him as he walked away, "Trouvons un traducteur apres le combat." There was no doubt that Dubois spoke no english, Joe spoke no french. There was no chance they were going to work it out before the bell.

With those words both men went to their corners and realized that without a translator this was going to be a fight. And once the bell rang it was a full on fight. Dubois was a master at holds and submissions, so Joe was left to grin and bear the pain rather than lose his title.

Timmy and I desperately searched for Dubois manager, but it turned out the guy we had the discussion with wasn't affiliated with the Olympian at all. We had been had for two thousand dollars and now our World Champion was in a shoot fight with a gold medalist.

We tried to get to Joe and let him know, but the crowd was raucous and we couldn't communicate with him.

Joe managed to win the first fall by sheer power and forcing the man's shoulders to the mat. The second fall came almost immediately afterward where Joe slipped and was pinned inadvertently.

After that, we all watched in fear of losing the World Title. The match went on for thirty five minutes and was called when a bite mark was seen by the referee in Dubois armpit. Joe was disqualified, Jacques claimed the championship and went on to defend a disputed version in France. We continued to claim the title as well saying that Dubois faked the bite and tried to steal the title.

It worked as far as keeping the title within the Dusted Triplets show, but the fans were still upset about seeing Joe continuously win. We had to find a way to get the title off him and onto someone that people wanted to pay to see win.

We headed back to Nebraska where we were going to run a series of shows for all of June. When we arrived in Lincoln I had my letter from Cody, but it was different than usual. It talked about her wanting me to get back in the ring and start wrestling again. She wrote about my passion for the sport and how it had been drained from me. It was the most intimate letter I ever received from Cody. It inspired me to write her back. I did it daily and sent each one with some money inside.

Our plan to move the title off Joe was to find someone that was popular in Nebraska and let him win it off Joe. Then we would go to the next state and let Joe win it back, then pick a hero from that hometown. The idea was to give each home town hero a victory their town could cheer for.

We should have paid attention to the rest of the crew. The idea that we were going to put the strap on someone new offended most of the guys who had been traveling with us for the last few years. But from a promoting angle we wanted it to go on someone that Joe could beat easily just incase he had to. But we were blind to their opinions. We spent some time in the local bars, reading the local paper, talking to people around town. There was only one source for heroes in Lincoln, Nebraska and that was Cornhuskers football.

The Linesman

It was about this time that Giant was too sick to wrestle. No matter how happy he seemed and how much joy he could bring our little crew, he was ill and getting worse. Lady took him with her to New York. She had an apartment there that had been in her family for a couple of generations and wanted to take Giant there to rest, recuperate, and most likely finish his life.

I went to the train station with Lady and Giant. I was there to see them off, thank them for all the years of work. It was a strange sensation. On the one hand I was saying goodbye to some long lasting friends as they were going out east. But, I was really saying goodbye to Giant and giving my condolences to Lady. Even though he had not passed, it was the reason I was seeing them off.

I had a long conversation with Lady about Cody. Told her of the letter that she had sent recently about me getting back in the ring.

Giant was asleep echoing snores throughout the train station, a habit that had got worse with him. Lady looked at me through her weary and tired eyes. "That girl has been trying to get you to wrestle since the

day you met her.” The woman was barely forty, but the toll our lifestyle took on her she might as well been seventy.

I nodded realizing that my work on the management of the show as opposed to performing seemed to be something that came up from time to time. “I know. But, I am just not built for it. I can’t be Joe.”

Lady flicked my ear to get my attention, “Get it through that thick head of yours. She doesn’t want you to wrestle because you excel at it. She wants you to be happy. She wants you to live your passion.” I silently agreed, but she kept on. “You took tremendous chances to get where you are, but you aren’t doing what you dreamed of doing. Listen to your wife, have a match, make your sacrifices worth it.”

I smiled while looking at my old friend. I could hear the train whistle in the distance, there wasn’t much time left. “You know, I am really sorry things had to turn out this way.” I motioned to the sleeping giant next to her.

Lady leaned in and kissed me on the forehead. “I decided a long time ago that I was sticking by his side until the end. I knew what I was getting into. I have prepared for it.”

I thanked her one more time and helped her wake Giant. When the train stopped they handed a worker their tickets and they disappeared into the train. It was a hard sight to see because I hadn’t truly connected with many people in our crew, but Lady and Giant went way back. I didn’t want to see them go, but they couldn’t be on the tour any more. Things were derailing too quickly with his health as well with the company.

We ended up staying in Lincoln for four weeks. The time there was maddening. The second week I checked with the front desk every day, but no letter showed. I continued to write Cody. I told her of the story we were trying to pull off. I told her about Giant and Lady. And I confided in her that as much as I wanted to wrestle again, I didn’t want to fail.

Joe and Timmy had found their hometown hero by Wednesday of the second week. Chad Manning was a huge guard that played for the

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University of Nebraska Cornhuskers. Although he was big and strong he had absolutely no wrestling talent. Timmy and Joe were spending as much time as they could with Chad. Trying to show him the ropes, get him up to speed enough to have a few matches.

At the end of that second week we had a show. It was the introduction of Chad. We put him on the stage and let him shoulder block a couple of guys to build up that he could take anyone down. Stanley Zonka was the one that was booked in a match with the kid.

Before the show went on I was in the back, "Stan, we need Chad to look very strong, like superman. I need you to really go flying into the ropes when he does his shouder block."

Stanley was lacing up his boots, "I will do this once. That is all. I will make him look like a star. But, I want to see a good paycheck this week. I can't believe I am doing the job for a football player."

I patted him on the back, "It'll all pay off in the end."

Before he went out to the ring, "What happened to Giant and Lady?"

I wasn't sure what to tell him, I didn't feel like it was my right to give out Giant's life story. "They headed to New York City. I think Giant is retired."

Stanley nodded in agreement and muttered, "So, the security is gone now too."

That night he did exactly what he told me. He made those shoulder blocks look like he was going to lose his head. Chad was nearly hoisted onto the audience's shoulders. He was the most popular person in the room, probably in the state.

We used that show to start promoting the idea that Chad would get a shot at Joe and the World Title next week. Something the crowd couldn't get enough of.

As that week ran down and we spilled into the next again I had no letter from Cody. I tried calling, against her wishes, but there was no

answer. My mind was panicking, but I didn't know why. I didn't know what was wrong, but I felt it. I felt that something was just not right.

I spent most of my days writing Cody and trying to focus on what I got to come home to once I had raised enough money.

The third week in Lincoln was a disaster. We had two shows, Friday and Saturday. Friday was the big one where Chad was going to get the pin on Joe. We had a celebration all planned out with balloons, confetti, and streamers. Then the second night we needed Chad to look like a monster again to try and setup the idea that even though Joe would be getting a rematch in a few weeks their hometown hero would still be on top.

We booked the Saturday fight to be with Stanley Zonka again. He made Chad look perfect the previous week, it only made sense to let him do it again.

On Friday night the match with Joe and Chad was the worst thing I had seen since I came back. Manning couldn't put a hold on Joe, he didn't know how. Instead he would shoulder block Joe over and over and then try and push him over.

Joe was left in the ring trying to show how powerful his opponent was, but you could see it in the eyes of the reporters on the side of the ring, this was not a legitimate bout. We had pushed the limits too far.

The match itself lasted close to forty minutes and ended with Chad winning by throwing Joe out of the ring. Even though the match was a farce, the crowd loved it and once again hailed Chad Manning as their conquering hero.

I went back to my hotel with every intention of going over the plan for the next day with Stanley Zonka, but something in the back of my mind was wrong. I didn't know what was wrong, but I had to leave. I had to get back home and I had to do it right away.

I was on a train that night and didn't get to witness what happened the next day. It might be for the best because the next day was the nail in the coffin of the Dusted Triplets.

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When Chad Manning came out to defend his title against Stanley Zonka who was supposed to lose in dramatic fashion again things went wrong. Chad opened the match with a vicious looking shoulder block, but Stanley reversed it into an armbar. Chad submitted within seconds to lose the first fall of the best of three.

After that Chad tried his best to keep his distance and not give up position to Stanley, but it was no use. No matter how hard he and the referee tried to work together the match was over two falls to none in less than fifteen minutes.

Joe and Timmy were forced to watch the title not just fall to one of the Zonka brothers. Once he had the title he walked into the crowd where he was welcomed by John Stanton in a big hug. It was over for the company. The Zonkas had made a deal with Stanton. Most of our crew were so unhappy with the way they had been treated they wanted to go find new deals anyway. With the act of just one man the company helped create, the company that had made me rich was gone.

As much as the group wanted to blame the Zonka brothers for turning on us as promoters, it was really us who had turned on our crew. We gave up on them. We gave up on the sport. If Stanley hadn't taken the title out of the Dusted Triplets we may have been so ridiculed by the press that we may have damaged the sport forever.

But that was not the worst news I got that day. I returned home mid day on Saturday. Arriving at the Denver train station I had to find a taxi to take me back to Longmont. It was a long and arduous ride because I knew something was off. I tried to think the best, but my mind kept spiraling back to the worst of possibilities.

When we arrived at my house I grabbed my bag and tipped the driver. The walk up the walkway to my porch was almost impossible. There was something on the other side of the door that I didn't want to see and each step through our yard was something that I had to physically force myself to endure.

Richard W. Kelly

Memories wouldn't leave me alone. I turned back to the mountains and I thought of our nights sharing a sleeping bag in the wilds of nature. When I looked back down at my yard I could see my naked self jumping through the yard to find a locked door and my wife talking about how warm the fire was.

But the memory that hit me the hardest, as I opened the door I remembered the man who sold us the house, "My wife died slumped over next to the mailslot in the door. Her blue dress scattered around her body."

I don't know why or how it happened, but as I opened the door to my house there on the ground next to the mail slot was Cody in a blue dress. The mail coming in through the slot had piled up on and around her. I didn't know how long she had been like that, but it had been at least a few days.

I don't know how to describe the feelings I felt at that moment. I think I left the real world for a few moments. I remember the house turning upside down and me falling to my knees wanting to reach out to my wife, but knowing it wasn't her anymore. I don't believe that I took a breath for a while, I don't think I felt anything physical. I was just there and the world and all of its physical laws ceased for a long time.

I didn't cry that day. In one sense I think I was relieved that I couldn't destroy her life anymore. All the things I did to try and make her life better backfired. I was the demon in her life and if nothing else I was rendered harmless to her from that moment forward.

Tying Up the Loose Ends

There was a funeral. I don't remember it. I don't remember much of that week truthfully. Cody is buried somewhere in the foothills of the Flat Iron mountains. I spend a lot of time there now a days. I like to spend a few weeks every summer out in those mountains trying to find the essence of my lost wife.

I feel like I find her most years. It is usually at night when the stars are out, the only sounds you hear are the coyotes and it is just me, my fire, and my sleeping bag. Maybe I don't find her. Maybe she find me and crawls into that sleeping bag with me. We lay together for a few hours connecting as one once again.

The Cody I like to remember is the Cody before. No one ever wants to let me forget the Cody from after.

There were lots of police and investigators. I was interviewed dozens of times. And I was offered an explanation of what happened, but I always refused it. I wanted nothing more than to remember what I wanted to remember and I was willing to leave whatever else there was behind. It was ok with living a lie as long as it didn't break me.

Eventually, I read the police report. I think it was 1940 when I finally gave in and found out what really happened. I learned of the rehab facility and how they treated their patients. I learned of the sterilization. I learned of the friends she had in the hospital that would later hang around our house when I was away.

It turned out that she never kicked the heroin habit. She had found ways to get it smuggled into the facility. She reduced her dependency, but she never kicked the habit. When we found out about our tax issue and I went back on the road one of her friends from the rehab center moved in with her. Her name was GeorgeAnne, but she went by Sous.

She was a deeper addict than Cody was. She had been in and out of the morphine maintenance clinic quite a few times. She too was sterilized and because of it she was in the midst of a deep depression.

I believe her intentions were good. I think she moved in with Cody to keep her company and so they could keep each other on the right path. But, it wasn't long before they both were back in the throws of addiction.

GeorgeAnne was called Sous because she was known as the sous-chef of cooking drugs. Even in those early days habitual users had found ways to get the active ingredients out of the over the counter medications, cook them, smoke them, and in times of true submission inject them.

There was a huge stash of heroin in my house. They had started to order in large quantities from Sears and Roebuck spending about half of what I was sending home on the drugs. Sous managed to filter out the syrup from the tar like substance of the heroin. They would smash the tablets they had so they could be snorted and then at the end of the day they would inject extracted opiate into their arms.

From what I understand they don't think Cody died from the drugs, but from misuse of the needles, infection at the intravenous sites, and possible strokes or heart attacks from possible air embolisms. I think she realized she was dying when she wrote me the last letter. It says a lot about who she was that spent her last words with me trying to plead with

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me to live the life I wanted to live. Especially when I feel like I am the reason she didn't get to live hers.

In the same way I forgave Milt eventually, I also forgave GeorgeAnne. I never really knew the girl, but by the time I learned of the story I didn't have any ill will towards her. I understood that she was trying her best and I don't think for one second she wanted bad things to happen. In many ways I pray in thanks that she was there for Cody.

I also learned to forgive the doctor at the clinic. I think if I had known what happened back then I may have murdered the man and spent the rest of my life in prison, but as I got older I started to understand society and the roles we play. We do what we think is best. We aren't monsters we aren't out to get one another. I truly believe that he administered the therapy he thought was best. He followed protocol and listened to the law when it came to Cody's reproductive abilities. It wasn't him who decided she needed to be sterilized, it was our society as a whole. A belief that horrify people of today's world was just a stepping stone in our evolution back then.

Getting over Cody was something that was hard for me. It took twenty years at least, but it was what I needed to do at the pace I needed to do it at.

After her funeral I sold the house and property to Sinclair Oil and took what money I had left along with the sale and paid off my tax debt. Joe came to Colorado when he found out about Cody, but I had already left. I didn't stay more than a couple of days.

I rode the rails the old way, hopping from freight train to freight train. I didn't want to be a part of the uppity crowd inside the cars anymore. I wanted to see the world the way I expected to when I left home.

I didn't have a destination. I rode the rails for months on end. I was a hobo with a few thousand dollars in my pocket. A secret I got good at keeping otherwise I probably would have been thrown from the train at some point.

Richard W. Kelly

I considered returning to Denton where I grew up. I didn't know who I would contact. I doubt my parents were looking to rehouse their runaway son.

I spent a few weeks in Memphis, Tennessee. I wouldn't admit it to myself, but I think I was hoping to find Ethel, the girl that I briefly fell for before I met Cody. A girl I was ready to marry, but I wasn't ready to abandon wrestling for. I never saw her, but it is probably for the best.

In the end I landed in New York City. In the throws of depression I refused to get a hotel. I lived on the streets for a few months. I wandered the city asking people about a giant.

Early one morning I asked a priest if he had ever seen a giant and he told me he had. He talked of an older woman and a humongous man that showed up a few months back in his church. He talked of the hard life that wrote its story across her face and the immediate joy that gained just from speaking with the giant.

When I asked where they might be he took me to a graveyard where he said the giant lay. He had not heard from Lady since his passing though. I stayed with Giant for nearly a week. I slept next to his grave site and told him stories of traveling the country, falling in love, and finding purpose in life.

Near the end of the week Lady showed up to pay her weekly respects to her old friend. When she walked up and saw a bum sleeping near her friends grave she raised her purse over her head to shoo the man away, but when I looked up and saw her face she broke out with a huge smile.

"Squirt? What are you doing here?" She reached down to help me to my feet.

"Just been hanging out with Giant here. Just a couple of pals catching up." I knew that what I was saying sounded crazy, but nothing seemed sane anymore.

"You look like you haven't showered in a week." She squinted one eye trying not to clue me in on how badly I stunk.

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“It’s probably been three or four.”

Needless to say, I ended up back at her apartment with a fresh shower. When we got there, there was a line for the shower that was shared with the entire floor, but as soon as the rest of the apartment building got within thirty feet of me they all gave up their spot in line to get me showered first. No one wanted to deal with my stench even if it meant waiting longer for their own cleanliness.

That first week with Lady was a cathartic experience for both of us. We both needed to find a way to move on with our lives and not wallow in the sadness of the life we no longer had. Then that first week turned into two, two became a few months and before I knew it Lady and were living together.

She was twenty years my senior so at first we just helped each other understand our strengths and how we could once again contribute to society. But as most things evolve with time we became closer and closer eventually falling into one another’s arms for not just companionship, but an intimacy that we both missed.

We lived together for five years taking it day by day. I worked as a ticket taker at Madison Square Garden and she helped take care of the children that overran her apartment building. It took a long time, but I was happy. At least I thought I was. As much as I thought I had everything I wanted or needed I was wrong.

I came home very late one night as the event at the Garden had gone way longer than expected. When I walked in the door there was a very familiar face there. It was Jake Shemp, the wrestling territory boss of the New York area. “Squirt!” he shouted as I walked in the door.

“Shemp?” I was lost as to why he would be there.

“I am so glad to see you. I have an offer I hope you won’t refuse.”

Debut at the Garden

I walked down out of the dressing room in my singlet and wrestling boots. It had been so many years since I stepped into a ring and I had no confidence that I would be able to perform. I just saw the fight between Joe and Chad play out in my head over and over.

Jake Shemp was looking to expand his wrestling empire into New Jersey and wanted my expertise on how to maximize our profits and draw the most heads we could through storylines. It was definitely an offer I couldn't refuse. I came around the corner and saw the curtain that led into the arena. I walked up to it where I could feel my breath bouncing off and back into my face. Lady walked up next to me and took me by the arm. "Your valet is here." She said the words as if she were British.

I chuckled, but my nerves were too high to actually laugh. The one piece that Shemp wouldn't budge on when we were negotiating was that I not only help him behind the scenes, but I become a full time performer as well. He laid it out as my first wife's dying wish and my soon to be wife's living demand.

As I exhaled I could hear the ring announcer in the next room over. "And his opponent. Weighing in at one hundred seventy pounds.

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Hailing from some ass backwards cowboy town in Texas. He is the modern marvel of the wrestling world. Squirt Malone!”

Right on queue I stepped through the curtains and into the lights of Madison Square Garden. The sight of the crowd surrounding the ring mixed with the high pitched cheers got something inside me flowing. I slowly looked from side to side feeling my heart beat speed up. I looked over at Lady who gave me the softest most beautiful smile. She leaned over and said, “You’ve made it.”

At that moment I felt change within me, I suddenly lost any fears I had and let a new personality explode through me. It was a personality I would come to know and one that subside after I was done performing. I raised my left hand in air to screams and cheers. Then I started walking to the ring with a swagger and purpose that was exaggerated beyond any normal person. I slid into the ring and held the ropes open for Lady. We stood in the center of the ring under the lights of the show, the history of the building, and the immensity that was professional wrestling. We stood there ready to give whatever we had to entertain that crowd.

I was twenty six years old with a new love on my arm and finally living the dream that I ran away from home to live. For the first time I realized everything I had been through no matter how painful was for this moment and I wouldn’t give it up for the world.

From the Author

When I set out to write this novel it started as a historical novel. I wanted to tell the story of the Goldust Trio and how they helped create slam bang wrestling, brought storyline into the show creating cards with multiple matches as opposed to single fights, and tell a few stories from the old days in there. I learned in this process that was too confining. I kept running into ideas like, ‘it would be more interesting if Toots had been a runaway’. So, I changed the character’s name and made the change.

It wasn’t long that every historical person had their name changed and story altered from reality. So, this isn’t a historical novel at all, but one that was inspired by the events of wrestling from the early twentieth century.

As far as writing the novel this one was planned out entirely. This is the first time I have fully outlined a book before I wrote it. I think that also hindered some of the creativity because the writing process was significantly slower than normal. Of course it also could have been that I was constantly doing research into how people lived in the nineteen-teens.

This started out as a short story I wrote in 2014 called *The Greatest Spectacle in All 38 States*. I then outlined it into a full novel in 2017. *Lost*

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the original short story so I rewrote it in 2018 with the intention of it being a part of the novel. But, all the changes I made left the short story as an early artifact as opposed to a living piece of the book. Then I sat down to write this one in October of 2021. I am writing this last piece on April 23, 2022.

I think it is important to note, that I have no connection to wrestling other than a lifelong persistent connection to the art form. I am not a wrestler, although I tried in high school, I do not work for a wrestling company, although I tried after college, and I do not have any inside knowledge of wrestling, although I have done a lot of reading on the subject.

If you are interested in learning about the real world of professional wrestling from 1800s to today try out some of the following sources.

Books

- Fall Guys by Marcus Griffin
- Shooters the Toughest Men in Professional Wrestling by Jonathan Snowden

Websites

- Pwtorch.com – Pro Wrestling Torch
- F4Wonline.com – Wrestling Observer
- Wrestlingdata.com – Match histories
- Wrestling-titles.com – Title histories

Podcasts

- Jim Cornette Experience
- Something to Wrestle
- PWTorch Daily Cast
- WhatCulture Wrestling
- Grilling JR

As I said nearly every character is based on a real person, but they were all changed.

Andrew ‘ the farmer’ Slate was Martin ‘the farmer’ Burns

He was a huge name in wrestling in the late 1800s early 1900s. He did have a learn wrestling through the mail course.

John ‘Squirt’ Malone was Joseph ‘Toots’ Mondt

He was one of the founding members of the Goldust Trio. He was trained by Martin Burns, although not through the mail. And he was nicknamed for his general youth in wrestling. He and Ed Lewis are considered the fathers of slam bang wrestling which is the bigger move, harder hitting style that slowly moved away from the holds and long slow matches.

The rest of his story is fabricated, I don’t know about his love life or even his desire to wrestle versus promote. These are generalized stories that I have heard over the years as generic and common within wrestling.

Joe ‘The Strangler’ Johnson was Ed ‘The Strangler’ Lewis

Ed Lewis was famous for his headlock which looked like he was strangling people. If you knew wrestling in the 1920s you knew Ed Lewis. He was a five time World Champion and one of the founding members of the Goldust Trio.

Timmy Sampson was Billy Sandow

He was also a wrestler and manager of Ed Lewis. He was more on the promoting side than the wrestling side. The time frame with him and

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Ed Lewis and Toots is all messed up here. Sandow actually met Ed Lewis while teaching recruits for World War I hand to hand combat.

Dusted Triplets were known as The Goldust Trio

Considered the first modern promotion, the Goldust Trio brought in storylines, multi-match cards, and a bigger style to wrestling. At the time it took over the more common wrestlers touring with circus and carnivals, although I don't believe any of the character I based this on actually were a part of that type of show. And it fell to the rise of the territory wrestling promoter which actually happened in the 30s and 40s.

Fred Gottlieb was Frank Gotch

One of the biggest names in the history of wrestling. Not much is changed from him. The story of the his title win and title defense were based on as much research as I could muster. The insinuation that those matches were works and not legitimate is speculation.

Gavrie Stepanchikov was George Hackenschmidt

Again a huge name in wrestling. I didn't change much of anything about him.

Billy Mulders was William Muldoone

He was probably around a bit earlier than this story suggests and was included just because he is one of my favorite figures in wrestling history. He is often considered the first World Champion. Not because he held a World Title, but because he held many titles.

Dr. Jesse Steamer was Dr. Benjamin Roller

Richard W. Kelly

He was the Pacific Coast Champion, he was the trainer in the 1911 rematch between Gotch and Hackenschmidt. He was involved in the World Title picture.

Wally and Stanley Zonka were Wladek and Stanislaus Zbysko

Wrestling brothers who were also involved in the World Title picture. The big storyline with Stanislaus beating Wayne Munn then dropping the title to Stecher is all based on events. How much of those events were story and how much were real is a different question.

John Stanton was Joe Stecher

Huge name in the teens and twenties. He and Lewis did fight for the title back and forth somewhat in the shadow of what Gotch had accomplished decades before. Again the how much of those feuds were real life and how much were promotional stories are unknown.

Cody Levine was Cora Livingston

Cora Livingston and Toots Mondt never met as far as I can tell. She only wrestled for about seven years and mostly with a circus. She was the first women's World Champion back in 1910. I based this character on Cora Livingston because of the stories I've read about this woman and how tough she was. The idea that she could outshine men in a show full of fighting always intrigued me.

Lori Bennice was Laura Bennett

She was friends with Cora Livingston and was the person Cora beat to become the Women's World Champion.

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Giant and Lady were generic characters

There have been a handful of people in the wrestling industry who had acromegaly. Giant was put in as an amalgamation of these telling the story of the disease. Lady was a general early wrestling valet included to help tell the story of Giant.

Carl Eadock was Earl Caddock

He was included solely because of the history of the World Title and it helped feed into the Joe Johnson's obsession with the title. Again, a big name in wrestling and a transitional champion between Stecher and Lewis.

Jake Shemp was Jack Curly

He was an early territory promoter that had control of the New York area.

Jacques Dubois was Henri Deglane

Former Olympic champion and claimed a disputed version of the World Title at one point after framing Ed Lewis of cheating in a match. This is also known as the original screwjob.

Chad Manning was Wayne Munn

Former Cornhusker football player turned wrestler. He is famous for being the first truly non wrestler to hold the World Title. Whether or not he was supposed to drop the title to Stanislaus is open for questioning.

Richard W. Kelly

The following are names used in the story that are essentially fictional. They originally were stocked with actual wrestler names, but I don't think have any correlation to their real life counterparts anymore.

- Theodore Cur was Louis Cyr
- Sam Spooner was Tom Jenkins
- Troy Stanton was Tony Stecher
- Clint Coolidge was Charlie Cuttler
- Harriet Lewis was Louise Harris

There are many other things in the book that were written with a lot of research. Kayfabe and carny which were codes of silence and code words wrestlers used to communicate with one another without giving things away. There was a lot of research into Denver and Dallas with actual businesses and maps. I looked into the development of transportation, phone lines, hotel operations, real estate, taxes, the draft....

So this book although isn't based largely on real events of people's lives was based in a reality of the early nineteen hundreds. I guess that makes this less of a historical novel and more of an alternate history novel.