

## **Twelve Mighty Orphans**

The Inspiring True Story of the Mighty Mites Who Ruled Texas Football

Jim Dent

ISBN-13: 978-0-312-38487-6

Read: 2010 January 27 - February 10.

Reviewed: 2010 February 20.

Tom Andrews is starting a men's book club at church. The first meeting will be next Thursday, February 25 where **Twelve Mighty Orphans** will be discussed. I read many books and, conversely, am trying to socialize more so this seems like a good confluence. Otherwise I never would have picked up a book that had to do with football.

But it's not really about football. It's about an orphanage. Through most of the 20th century, there was an orphanage in east Ft. Worth, the Masonic Home. This is part of the story of the kids that went through that home, particularly some of those who played football under legendary Coach Rusty Russell.

Coach Russell arrived at The Home in the late 1920s after service in Europe in World War I and college. He was brought on as a teacher and a coach but there was no budget for sports, nor any equipment. He was told at the outset that his budget for football was the change in his pocket. The team did not even have a football and none of the orphans wore shoes April through September.

If you were a Mason in good standing, that is, your dues were paid up, when you died your children were eligible to go to The Home. The stories of how many of the children came to be there are told. One dad was a bootlegger up near Childress and was shot in the back by rivals. Another died of cumulative chemical poisoning from a job dying gunny sacks. Another young man with small children dropped dead of heat stroke right after work one day; another died of typhoid after drinking out of a polluted pond. Another died of tuberculosis. Another was probably murdered for his land which, it turned out later, had oil under it.

Not all of these men left children without any parents at all, although the bootlegger did. When his wife heard the news, probably fearing for her own life, she scrambled into her best stockings and shoes and ran for the train, never to return. In the culture of that time a destitute widow was as bad off as an orphan, maybe worse. Some parents sent some kids to the orphanage so they could afford to survive with the ones they had left. Some widows went to widow's homes.

This was during the Great Depression which made none of this any easier.

So, kids arrived at the front gate of The Home. For some it was a shock, like going to prison. For others it was the best thing that had ever happened to them. They had their own bed, and shoes, at least from October through March.

In football, the Mighty Mites had some advantages over the better provisioned teams. The coach had access to them 24 hours a day year around. They were angrier, meaner, and more competitive than most “City Guys” and once in a while a big kid with some talent would move through the program. There were also many disadvantages. The Mites never fielded more than twelve meaning that they never had much reserve on the bench. Having few to choose from, they had average weight for high school kids, 140 - 150 pounds, as opposed to the hand picked bruisers from larger school systems. As a small school, they were relegated to Class B which, in the 30s and 40s was worse even than when I was there in Class A.

In their first game under Coach Russell, at Mineral Wells, he made a deal with the opposing coach that the winner could keep the ball. In this way, the Mites earned their first piece of official equipment: their own football. After a few years, Russell also managed to get the coaches in the area’s A district to vote to allow the Mites to play with them at the higher level. It was from that district that they went into playoffs several times, earning enmity from a minority of the opposing coaches.

Being a Masonic institution had its advantages and disadvantages as well. As the Mites became more popular, the Shriners band would bring their horns and come out to games on a flatbed and, in a tipsy state, would play what could loosely be called music, some of it approximately recognizable. Not only were the Mites the underdogs, like Seabiscuit, their contemporary, but they had as fans every Mason in the state, something like 200,000 of them.

The Shriners weren’t the only ones who were drunk. Trainloads of fans on the way to a big game somewhere would be carrying brown bags. This included the likes of Amon G. Carter the early booster of Ft. Worth, and many of his rich, Depression-proofed friends.

For me, this book was not so much about football as it was a history of Texas just before I was there. It fills in some gaps in my own narrative. It is impossible that my parents and grandparents would not have known about and followed the Mites during their heyday. Indeed, some of the big final and semi-final games were played against Amarillo, the last of the series in this book *in* Amarillo. I mentioned this to mother who pointed out that my sister Wilda, playing basketball and volleyball at Rio Vista High in the early 80s had herself played against teams from The Home! The Home is closed now, but has only been so for a few years. It was there for nearly all of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Big games were also played in very familiar places like Corsicana, Lubbock, and Highland Park. Eventually Russell was recruited to Highland Park and from there to SMU where he coached the legendary Doak Walker. Dad was certainly in seminary at Perkins (SMU) during some of that time but I don’t recall him mentioning anything about it, except for an occasional disparaging remark about Doak Walker.

One big shock for me early in the book was that Abner McCall, President of Baylor University when I attended there, had been an orphan at the home in the 20s and early 30s. Doing research on this, I discovered that McCall's father had died in the great flu epidemic of 1918 leaving his mother with three children that she could no longer support. The author points out two or three times that Judge McCall had no football talent, but he did have conviction and ambition (to be President of the United States no less) and did quite well later in life. I had not known that McCall even was a mason, but he in fact attained one of the highest degrees.

For a sobering review of the flu of 1918, visit any cemetery in Texas.

Things were done differently in Texas, and in the world, seventy and eighty years ago. My upbringing was a transition from that world to the one of today. Paddling, corporal punishment, was common, and though it says that Coach Russell himself didn't ever use "the paddle" except to make players run faster, other authorities at the school were not so reserved. One assistant would punish the boys with so many licks that they couldn't get up and had to be carried out by their buddies. One day this man was supervising a swimming outing in a Trinity River that was closer to flood stage than it appeared. Several of the boys got in trouble but managed to get out or were rescued. In what seemed like divine justice, the wielder of punishment, however, drowned.

Not only did the children get paddled but if they were chronically unmanageable they would be turned out. A nearest relative would be notified by telephone and the child would be escorted to the gate and left there, never to return. Perhaps it was safer on the streets in that time, but official punishment like that would be unthinkable today.

Of course, girls were caged in and boys kept strictly away from them. Sometimes the boys would get out and fraternize with neighborhood girls nearby, but holding hands or even saying something affectionate on campus was strictly forbidden at the orphanage. Even siblings were kept apart. A pregnancy would, of course, be a disaster.

Civil engineering standards weren't what we would expect today either. When the championship game was to be played in Corsicana in 1932 (because Russell lost the coin flip, as usual), hastily erected extra stands at the field collapsed with thousands of people on them! Miraculously, no one was seriously hurt. Even worse than that, Doc Hall, who tended to the orphans and the football team gratis and always rode shotgun with Russell in "Ol' Blue" to the games, was convinced that someone had food-poisoned the team on purpose the night before. Everyone had eaten at the same place and everyone had diarrhea up to and in to the game. In one of many heart breaking close calls, that game ended up a zero to zero tie, decided in favor of Corsicana by "20 yard line penetrations." Later, the UIL would change the rules to dispense with the penetrations which, after all, served to make the 20 yard line essentially a secondary goal line, and the result of this game was changed to "co-championship." This, unfortunately, was posthumous to Coach Russell.

Although it is “football,” there wasn’t much successful kicking in the games related in this book. Most extra points were missed, field goals were rarely attempted, and that DeWitt kid like never to have learned not to clip. Having been around (but not much interested) in football all my life, I had always known that there was a foul called clipping, but it was not until I looked it up on the net in order to try to understand what DeWitt was doing, that I finally understood what clipping was: blocking a non-ball-carrying opponent below the waist.

That and “the humper,” a block that is illegal today because it results in more injury than blocking. Hardy Brown, one of the main stars of the team (one of the bootlegger’s sons) used the humper mercilessly, well up into a professional career that ended with the San Francisco 49ers. They said he was mean and he did end several opponent’s careers but he wasn’t that good in the non-destructive role of playing as a back.

Hardy was the natural leader among the boys, however, and ran the 4 a.m. milking operation, considered a high privilege. (Yes, the orphanage kept their own milk cows.) He also decided who would fight who down by the water tower after dinner every night, oversaw thefts from the kitchen, and activities with cows that went far beyond milking. As he approached his final years at The Home, his position with the team was important enough that some of the rules, such as curfew when he was out on a date with a rival team’s homecoming queen, were often “overlooked.”

The orphans were close and no one was allowed to call them “orphan” except each other. Amazingly crass, Ol’ Blue’s arrival to jeers of “Orphans! Orphans!” from opponents often generated enough anger to decide many of those football games in their favor.

There is much more that could be said about the situation of the times and of the plight of some of the worst off in those times, but this is the flavor. If you’re a football fan, or a history of the south fan, or a fan of the underdog, this book is worth reading.

Oh, and the Masons? Dent points out that Generals Sam Houston and Santa Ana were both Masons and that when Santa Ana was being brought to Houston at San Jacinto, April 21, 1836, he did what he could to make sure that this was well known. Did he leave that battlefield with his life because of the secret Masonic handshake? It’s only speculation; we can probably never know, but this did get me to asking relatives about my own family’s history with Masonry.

Viann was a Rainbow Girl, sponsored by her Aunt Gwen and Uncle Weldon, Eastern Star and Mason respectively. She did not go further, nor did she marry a Mason, which would have been required to go further. My grandfathers were both Masons but both left the brotherhood. Mother tells me that her dad quit, walked out in the middle of a meeting one night, because it was just a big bull pen and all the cigarette smoke made him sick. I also learned that dad’s dad had been officially thrown out of the Masons following a law suite that involved some indebtedness but which had been eventually straightened out.

I bet there are some interesting things to be known in the courthouse records at Canyon. Maybe I don't want to know....

Dad wouldn't have much to do with Masons, but he did tell the story of two Masons at Marysville, where his first church was located. They hated each other and would not speak to each other normally, but they rode together to the Lodge in Gainesville every Monday night. "Best people on earth...." he would quip.

Santa Ana and Sam Houston fighting to the death over the future of Texas. ... best people on earth.