

HACK

The meteoric life of one of baseball's first superstars: Hack Wilson

Chapter 1, Ellwood City 1900 – 1910

“Fused”

“People used to walk eight blocks out of their way to see that little bastard hit a baseball.”

In 1898 Robert Wilson, a young man in his twenties, drifted into Ellwood City. This northwestern Pennsylvania Town, named after the inventor of barbed wire, was then only ten years old. Like the nearby communities of Aliquippa, Wampum, Koppel, New Castle and Beaver Falls, it owed its existence to the steel industry.

Wilson went to work as a heater for Steel Car Forge, a mill that produced grab irons for ladders. A heater was in charge of the crew that melted incoming ore. The job required stamina and leadership, plus the ability to withstand extreme heat and extreme cold. And it paid well.

Shortly after he began work, Wilson moved into Grandma Wardman's rooming house, one block from her son Connie's. She served several other boarders aside from Robert, mostly mill men and streetcar drivers. He slept and ate there when he wasn't working or drinking. One night while drinking late at Dugan's, he met a working girl from the west side named Jennie Caldwell. For weeks they met nightly at the same spot.

Grandma Wardman soon discovered that Wilson had taken up with a working girl from the west side. At first her warnings were subtle, but when Wilson began to stay out all night, she changed her style. Her favorite admonishment made her sound like a blues singer: "Bobby, you're doin' wrong."

The sparring between the landlady and her tenant continued for several months. She demanded that he consider the consequences, to which he responded with a laugh and a wink. But one day in September 1800 he stopped laughing. Jennie was pregnant with his child.

He shared the news with Grandma. She forgave him but demanded that he accept responsibilities and marry the girl. Initially he acted as though he would, but one day he came home and flatly stated that he could not marry "trash." They argued, repeatedly, but he won out, promising to support the child but not to marry the mother. Showing a lack of vindictiveness, Grandma allowed him to stay.

Lewis Caldwell was born on April 26, 1900. As he had vowed, Wilson helped support the child but never married Jennie. He continued to live at Grandma Wardman's rooming house, laboring by day and drinking at night.

While his father maintained his old habits, the child moved into behavior patterns of his own in his first seven years. Much of the time he

was alone while his mother patronized west-side saloons. When they were together, they walked the streets of town as she shopped or looked for temporary work. This pattern was repeated on Sundays when his father arrived to take him for walks.

After leaving the west-side factory area, father and son would walk through the Italian section and up the hill towards the Hotel Oliver, with its lavish landscaping. Once Wilson took his son inside to see the bowling alley and the billiard rooms. From there they walked down the hill to Lawrence Avenue and past Whistlers, where a shirt could be purchased for 75 cents and a pair of trousers for \$1.25. Occasionally the two stopped to watch a shopkeeper shoveling out mud which had been thrown into stores by the hooves of passing horses. Behind the same shops garbage was piled high. Often, before taking Lew home, Wilson stopped at the Twentier Hotel Bar or some other local spot to grab a quick beer.

Jennie, herself illegitimate, was 16 years old when her son was born. A few years before, she and two friends had traveled from Philadelphia to take advantage of the plentiful jobs in Ellwood City. She moved into the factory area on the west side. She worked until the time the child was born and returned to work soon after because the money the father sent could not support her and the baby. At first Lew stayed with neighbors and friends. Later he spent most of the time on his own, while his mother worked.

The town that surrounded young Lewis had many of the qualities of a brash American frontier town, the kind of place where piles of garbage and billiard rooms coexisted. In 1888, a former partner of Andrew Carnegie's named H.W. Hartman had looked out over the valley of the Connoquenessing and exclaimed, "This is the site for my city!" A year later the land was purchased from farmers. Six months after that the ground was

broken. Soon Hartman watched from his yacht on the river as a small city evolved out of the rich farmlands.

Workers poured in to fill the jobs at the mills, the quarries and other manufacturing companies that sprang up. Occasionally Ellis Island produced a bona fide immigrant for the Ellwood City melting pot, but more often these new workers were homegrown products: Italians from New Castle, hot mill men like Robert Wilson from nearby Greenville and working girls such as Jennie Caldwell from Philadelphia.

Like most youthful frontier towns, Ellwood City had the ingredients for crime: individuals with money, drifters without it, an understaffed police force, ample alcohol and a pervasive feeling of rootlessness. In 1902 the same store was robbed two times in two weeks by the same robbers. In 1903 a man named Oscar Merkel discovered another man in his girlfriend's apartment. The two fought with bottles until Merkel managed to grab a gun and shoot the interloper dead. Said Merkel on the way to the police wagon, "I won't let anyone hit me with a beer bottle." In 1903 Pietro Santo, a neighbor of Jennie's, disfigured his girlfriend after she spurned his love. Starting at her forehead, he cut downward to her nose with a keen-edged stiletto. Not satisfied, he then smashed out all her teeth with the knife's handle. Ellwood City even sported an Italian terror group, the Black Hand, a gang of embezzlers and occasional murderers.

Alcohol accompanied the crime. The city had filled up with workers. They made good money, yet many like Jennie Caldwell and Robert Wilson had no intention of setting down roots. For them, evening drinking was one of the few available activities. Drunks were so common that once an acquaintance of Wilson's named Mike Donahoo lay by the side of the road all night and part of the next day while hundreds of townspeople strolled by.

Finally in the afternoon someone nudged Donahoo and discovered that he was dead.

The frontier personality of Ellwood City was more noticeable in Jennie's part of town than it was in the Wardmans' neighborhood, but by 1907 the presence of law-abiding citizens like the Wardmans helped stabilize the entire city. On May 29, 1907, as if to honor Ellwood City's new respectability, President Teddy Roosevelt passed through town on a railroad train. Jennie and Lew stood among the huge crowd and watched the President on the rear platform of the Baltimore and Ohio coach shaking hands and chattering, "Now don't hurt one another...the ladies first....hello, my boy....I am glad to meet all of you." As the train pulled away slowly, Roosevelt continued to bow and wave.

Three months later Jennie suddenly began to experience sharp stomach pains. For two days she did nothing about them, but finally a neighbor convinced her to call a doctor. Within minutes the doctor had a taxi to take her to the hospital, and arrangements were made for the boy to stay with neighbors. For six more days she lay in a bed at the Ellwood City Hospital with a burst appendix. She died August 13, 1907, a few months before her 24th birthday.

Wilson arranged for the funeral, paid for an unmarked grave in Locust Grove Cemetery and claimed his son. To make his interest in the girl seem credible, he told the newspaper that Jennie had at one time been a housekeeper at his rooming house.

The Wardmans knew that Lew's upbringing had been casual if not careless. The very first day he moved in, Grandma Wardman arranged for a neighbor, a Mrs. Bauder, to stitch shirts and trousers for his school clothes. Grandma also set up a rigid eating and cleaning schedule, and offered the

boy more adult attention than he had ever experienced. Still, while she indulged him, she also insisted on responsible behavior such as doing family errands.

Wilson felt no real reason to alter his routine. He reduced his evening drinking somewhat but made up for it on weekends. He did continue his habit of taking walks with Lew on Sundays. Once he was seen at the Twentier Bar tipping a little beer into his son's open mouth.

No matter how late Wilson worked the night before, no matter how much beer had been consumed, no matter how devastating his hangover was, he always went to work the next morning. At 6:00 a.m., carrying a lunch box stuffed with steak, vegetables and homemade cakes, he strode off to Steel Car Forge. An hour later Lew would arise and tug one of Mrs. Bauder's shirts over his large head.

While Robert Wilson was the boy's actual father, Connie Wardman served as his active parent. Lew idolized this man, who had been nicknamed after an idol, Connie Mack. Wardman and baseball were as close as a man and sport could be. He had played minor league baseball in Clarksburg, West Virginia, and was a hitter who usually got on base, even if it meant standing in front of a pitch. In the early 1900s, out of baseball and back in Ellwood City working at Steel Car Forge, Wardman managed and sponsored several industrial league teams. He also gave baseball lessons to children of the wealthy families.

In addition to his exceptional teaching skills, Wardman possessed a remarkable talent for spotting baseball ability. In young Lew he quickly noticed the beginnings of such ability. To be close to Lew and provide him with baseball experiences, Wardman insisted that the boy meet

him at the park daily at 5:00 p.m., bringing the man's glove. Night after night the boy sat on the bench next to his idol.

One Saturday Wardman left Lew behind while he took his team to New Castle for an intercity game, always a tough contest that could prove dangerous for a child. By the end of the fifth inning several near-fights and squabbles with umpires had whipped the large partisan crowd into a state approaching jingoism. After an inconsequential collision at second base an inning later, the fans rose as one and tore out onto the field after the men from Ellwood City. No fool, Connie led a retreat through the mob and onto the bus, escaping everyone except a large, red-haired fellow from New Castle who hung onto the back as the bus began to pull away. While the man strained and struggled to climb on, Connie took aim and kicked him in the stomach. He roared as the adversary dropped back to the pavement. An hour later he was playing catch with Lew in the back yard.

Wardman's monumental temper could also be directed at Lew, as it was the time the boy failed to return home from the pharmacy with medicine. After several futile shouts for Lew down the street, Wardman tore out of the house, across the road and into the back of the Twentier's Hotel. There he arranged for a taxi to take him to Shelby Field, where the boys of the town played baseball.

When Wardman climbed out of the taxi ten minutes later, he spotted Lew's stocky outline from a distance. And Lew also spotted Connie. Ignoring Connie's shouts, Lew took one look at the medicine lying by the side of the field and scurried away in the opposite direction. A moment later Connie stood in the middle of the field and bellowed, "You're going to get the paddle, you little son of a bitch." Lew's terrified friends melted away as Connie marched back to the taxi with the medicine in his hand.

Wardman was proud to be known for his standards. As a youth he vowed to a priest that he would never drink, and he kept his word until late in life. If his son Ted received a whipping in school, he would get a second one at home. Connie once made Ted drive a mule in a coal mine as part of his work experience. He carried with him a sense of right and a belief that he should enforce it. Once he found himself in a car with a man who had helped disrupt that game in New Castle. Upon discovering the fellow's identity, he ordered him from the car with his favorite epithet, "Get out of here, you son of a bitch. I promised never to talk with you people again." Fittingly enough, his last job before he died was as a deputy sheriff.

The seven-year old who came to live at Grandma Wardmans house at 716 Crescent Street acquired or developed Wardman's willingness to fight. Boys in Ellwood City and many adults learned to watch Lew's thick neck carefully. When it turned red, with the veins bulging, he was mad, and when he grew mad he used his little fists to work out his problems. His best friend, Chuck Twentier, son of the hotel owner, grew skilled at reading the signs and directing the young bull's anger at someone else.

Robert Wilson evidently did not discourage his son's pugilistic tendencies. Years later, in 1925, when the father returned to Ellwood City, he shared a story of his son's strength. The husband of one of Lew's half-sisters had been beating his wife regularly, despite Lew's warnings. At length, Lew attacked and beat the much larger man unmercifully.

In school, Lew was a reluctant and rebellious pupil. Classmates remember that he withstood few temptations, playing the role of class rowdy by tugging at girls' pigtails and pouring ink into coat pockets. Somehow he emerged into adulthood able to read and write.

There was no reason why formal education should have touched Lew, since his adult models reflected no evidence of schooling. His real education resulted from Wardman's forceful self-righteousness, Robert Wilson's sociability, Grandma Wardman's doting and the words of praise from the townspeople who saw him play baseball.

These people frequently walked far out of their way just to pass Shelby Field to watch Lew bat out long home runs and slide on his belly around the outfield. Careful coaching from Wardman combined with Lew's natural talent produced a ten-year-old who played as well as boys many years older. Most of the adults who came to watch this talented youngster also noted that he did little to conceal his pleasure at playing before an audience.

Early in the summer of 1910 word reached Robert Wilson that work opportunities in the area west of Philadelphia were plentiful and high-paying. He welcomed this news, for by 1910 he had grown uncomfortable in a situation where he was regarded as a drunken and irresponsible father. He was not strong enough to change his ways, but he did have the imagination to undertake a move-on. One afternoon, acting with uncharacteristic purpose, he led his son onto a train heading east.

In May 1928, 18 years after Lew and his father had left Ellwood City, Wardman and some other townspeople traveled 50 miles south to Forbes Field in Pittsburgh for a game between the Pirates and the Cubs. On the field before the game they presented a valise to Hack Wilson. After the game, with manager Joe McCarthy's permission, Hack returned to Ellwood City to spend one more night with the Wardmans.

The next morning Wardman's son Ted walked into the kitchen, to stare in awe at the shirtless man stationed behind the kitchen table scooping

cereal from an enormous bowl. “I’ve never in my life seen such a fine human specimen.” Ted said.

Later that morning the visitor made his way to the real estate office of Myron Gelbaugh, where he paid \$25 to assure “perpetual care” for the unmarked grave of his mother in Locust Grove Cemetery.