

Sitting on edge of the bench, Earl Blaum, first baseman and clean up hitter for the West Fargo Broncos, stared transfixed at the curtain of rain cascading from the dugout roof. It soaked the bill of his cap and his spikes, but he didn't move. Billy the clubhouse boy came up the tunnel and sat next to Earl sideways, feet up on the bench.

"What's wrong, Earl?"

"Rain."

"Yeah so we'll play two tomorrow. A double header."

"So eight chances for me to strikeout."

"Come on, Earl. You'll do it. You hit 499 homers. You can hit one more."

"Can I? It's been two weeks. I used hit a damn dinger everyday."

"But Earl, 500 is just a number."

"That's not the number screwing with my head."

"Yeah, I get it. Five thousand."

"That's a load of dough, Billy."

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Earl had little trouble hitting his first homerun in his first at bat as a rookie back in 1930. Or his 10th. Or 25th. Or 100th. He just swung his 40 ounce club with those Paul Bunyan arms and hoped. He missed it four times as much as he hit it, but when he connected the ball screamed. Though he didn't really hit a dinger every damn day, he never went more than two games without hitting a Blaumbomb, a description radio announcer Kid Hasty coined.

Earl destroyed every North Western League home run record anyone knew about. Most in a game, a double header, a week, a month, a season. He broke his own season record three times. He averaged close to 60 a season for eight seasons. He hit 20, 25 more than second best. Half as many as two whole teams one season. He hit most of them at home, where the High Plains Field left field fence was 305 down the line.

I know what you're thinking. Why the hell didn't he get called up?

Well, he was a Dr. Strangelove. A king of the K. A great, slow-footed lummoX, who couldn't hit his own weight. But the low average, errors and strikeouts, didn't matter to the Broncos fans.

They loved Earl for his humble "aw shucks" manner and his awesome orbital home run blasts.

His money, not that he had any, was no good at Wally Page's Dugout Bar and Grill, a fan watering hole across the street from the left field wall. Earl had hit many a home run onto the Dugout porch and roof and one through the storefront window.

Earl was ticked off that Wally Page at the Dugout was running a contest he called the 500th Ball with a five thousand dollar prize. What the hell, Earl figured, it was his home run, why should some lucky stiff walk away with five thousand clams, when Earl would get nothing, except maybe a steak and a beer.

Wally Page painted a six-inch diameter crosshairs target on the street in front of the Dugout and sold chances for \$5. If Earl's 500th blast hit the target, Wally would have Mary Ann, his waitress, pull a ticket and the winner would get \$5,000. Figuring it had to be a million to one shot, Wally Page had no intention of giving away five grand.

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Billy had an idea.

“What if your home run does hit the target and my ticket gets pulled?”

“Billy, you’re off your rocker. I can’t target a home run and even if I did, how do we know your ticket gets pulled.”

"Leave that to me.”

If your scheme works, how much do I get.”

Billy offered two grand and Earl was satisfied.

Billy went to the Dugout that night and spent every buck he had, 110 of them, on 22 home run tickets. As he put them in the bucket he secretly punched a hole in each one with a tack.

Billy caught up with Mary Ann after her shift and said, “How’d you like to make 250 bucks?”

Man, did her eyes light up. Billy punched a hole in a little piece of cardboard and had her feel the back of the hole with her finger.

The rain let up, but the game was postponed for wet grounds. The Duluth Lakers were in town and they had the best control pitcher in the North Western League in Fred Wills. Billy talked Earl into hitting some balls early the next morning and he talked Wills into pitching.

“Look Fred,” Billy said, “if things fall right a grand could fall to you.”

“A grand, you mean like a thousand bucks for pitching batting practice?”

“Not exactly.”

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So here was Billy’s plan: Fred grooves pitches to Earl right where Earl wants them. Earl hits them out one after another, while Billy stands outside in front of the Dugout bar and yells “Two

feet farther,” “Six feet left,” and like that. Wills adjusted where he threw the next pitch and Earl modified his swing. After a half hour of home runs, Earl dropped two in a row on the target.

“Ok,” Billy said, back on the field. “Can you guys recreate that in today’s game?”

“What?” Willis said. “First of all, how the hell do you expect me to throw a pitch in the same exact spot and second, you know you’re asking me to let him hit in a real game?”

“A grand,” Billy said.

“Damn,” he said, “I’ll try, but you better be good to your word.”

“Earl, how about you?”

“He throws me that same pitch, I’ll hit it out, but I can’t promise where it will land.”

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“Billy, I ain’t got no five grand. I can’t pay you,” Wally Page said that night after the game.

“Besides the damn ball hit the roof then bounced off old Barney’s head before it landed on the target.”

“Nothing in the rules against that.”

“Yeah, I know, but Billy, come on, you’re going to break me.”

“Well how much you got?”

“I sold 200 tickets, there’s a grand there. That’s about it. I don’t know what else to do.”

“I do,” Billy said.

He took the grand, gave \$200 to Mary Ann, \$700 to Wills and kept \$100 for himself. Old Barney got a steak and a beer.

What about Earl? Well today he is the half owner of Earl and Wally's Dugout Bar and Grill beyond the left field fence of High Plains Field in West Fargo — and Billy the clubhouse boy is his no. 1 bartender.