

## Contents

Foreword	xiii
Acknowledgments	xvii
Introduction	xix
1. Who Was Three Finger Brown?	1
2. Mordecai Peter Centennial Brown	7
3. Miner Brown	13
4. Three Finger	23
5. The Royal Rescuer	35
6. Grace under Pressure	52
7. Plenty of Pluck	70
8. The Champion	85
9. The Mentor	96
10. Old Reliable	110
11. The Great Eliminator	117
12. Outlaw Brown	131
13. Ambassador Brown	147
14. Forever Friend	158
15. Hoosier Hero	170
16. Old-timer	182
17. Brownie	193
Epilogue: Uncle Mort	201
Appendix A: How Did He Do It?	213
Appendix B: Mordecai Brown's Career Statistics	219
Notes	227
For Further Information	243
Index	245

## Introduction

Our search for Mordecai Brown's legacy began one day in 1993 when Scott Brown was researching old-time uniforms. He was mesmerized by one player's photograph in Don Honig's book *The National League*. His first thought was that the man in the picture was his grandfather, Clifford Brown. Scott dismissed that notion. Grandpa had never played baseball. Other than listening to the Big Red Machine on the radio in the 1970s, Clifford Brown cared little for the game.

Running his finger down to the caption, Scott read the words "Three Finger Brown." Brown? Just a coincidence? He had to find out.

First, Scott contacted the folks at the National Baseball Hall of Fame, who were extremely helpful in providing information on Mordecai "Three Finger" Brown. The pictures they sent confirmed the family resemblance.

Further research led Scott to an Indiana newspaper editor who recalled hearing about a drive to erect a memorial to Mordecai Brown. When Scott contacted the men behind the project, Mordecai's great-nephews Fred and Joe Massey, they were unsure of the family connection. But with the information they provided as well as other details given to Scott by genealogist Barbara Ingram, Scott confirmed that he was indeed a cousin to the great Cubs pitcher.

The Massey brothers were thrilled to learn about a branch of the family they hadn't before known existed. The memorial was something they'd thought about doing for many years. Now it seemed

as though they had been waiting for the rest of the family to show up first.

Scott's next step was to let his extended family know about the memorial being dedicated to their long-lost cousin. Among those he contacted was his father's cousin Cindy Thomson. Cindy and Scott have always shared a love of baseball, and he wasn't surprised when she showed up at the dedication in Nyesville, Indiana, (now part of Rockville) on July 9, 1994, with her parents, her husband, and one of her sons.

It took eight years before Cindy and Scott realized they would be writing a book together. This family undertaking was a labor of love reflecting their desire to pass on the legacy of character, strength, and charity that Mordecai portrayed during his lifetime.

With material provided by the National Baseball Hall of Fame Library, the Massey brothers, and others, Scott amassed an impressive collection related to Mordecai's life and career. By conducting interviews with people who knew Mordecai Brown and encountered him in various walks of life, Scott was gradually able to build a mental picture of the man known by his friends as Brownie. With Cindy's additional research, aided by the Society for American Baseball Research (SABR), Scott and Cindy have been able to recount the incredible details of Mordecai's Hall of Fame career.

When you spend countless hours studying someone's life, you begin to feel that you know your subject better than you know your next-door neighbor. After reading Mordecai's own words and the things others said about him, Cindy and Scott developed a personal attachment to a man they never met. Within the interviews and accounts of his life, they recognized family traits and values. The stubbornness Mordecai displayed when he wouldn't allow the police to escort him from the Polo Grounds seems very much like something Clifford Brown would do. Mordecai's love and dedica-

tion to the game resemble that of Golden Brown Peters's love of baseball. Mordecai's loyalty to his family and to his team is a trait seen all over the Brown family tree.

Despite being family members, we have tried to be fair. Had any scandal involving Mordecai been revealed, we would have reported it. However, we found none. Some might criticize Mordecai for jumping to the Federal League for more money. Some might look down on him for displaying his World Series medals every time he made an appearance or for capitalizing on his name when he opened a gas service station. That's fair, and readers are welcome to interpret his actions.

It's a mystery why it took so long for a biography to be written on Three Finger Brown, a man whose life was more extraordinary than most. After suffering a disfiguring injury when still a child, he used his mangled hand to his advantage and at twenty-six years old (an advanced age for an athlete) began a career that would provide him with a comfortable living. Most people would have stopped there, but Mordecai continued to turn his disability into a blessing, mentoring youths and demonstrating a fierce drive to better himself.

No other event better typifies Mordecai's unwillingness to let any obstacle stand in his way than the famous playoff game of 1908. How many players today would step up to the challenge of pitching in front of a barely restrained hostile crowd and in the face of death threats? Mordecai did, and at the end of an exhausting season as well—one in which he had been overworked, had suffered arm strain, and had mourned the death of his mother.

Even when Mordecai's effectiveness began to fade, he found a way to contribute by working as a player-manager, first in the Federal League and then for the Columbus Senators of the American Association. After that he managed for the Terre Haute, Indiana, semipro team; helped coach the pitchers at Indiana University;

and, finally, served as skipper for an oil company ball team, all the while teaching younger men what he had learned about being a big league pitcher. He wrote a series of articles to instruct young men how to pitch and, more important, how to conduct themselves as gentlemen in the business world. Mordecai lived what he preached. The worst any magazine reporter ever said about him was that he was “shy.”

As a role model, Three Finger Brown strove to embody the family values of his youth. As family members who were raised with the same penchant for hard work and determination as Mordecai, we are honored to tell his story. It’s one the world needs—an all-American story about how one can rise from humble beginnings, overcome obstacles, and leave a legacy of love for others.

# 1. Who Was Three Finger Brown?

*Our deeds determine us, as much as we determine our deeds.*

George Eliot

Mordecai Brown pulled a crumpled piece of paper from his jacket pocket. “If you pitch tomorrow and beat the Giants, we’ll kill you.”

“Threats! They can’t win with those.” He stuffed the note away and pulled out another. He squinted his eyes at the scrawling. “Die!” A handprint made with black ink was pressed into the center of the white page.

Mordecai knew other teammates had received threats from the Black Hand Mob, and it angered him. He marched up to the train’s smoking room car and burst in, seeking out manager Frank Chance.

“Let me pitch tomorrow,” Mordecai bellowed at the manager the newspapers called the Peerless Leader. “Just to show those so and so’s they can’t win with threats.” Mordecai pulled wads of the Black Hand letters from his pockets and held them under Chance’s nose.

Chance made no promises. Brown returned to the passenger section.

The steam-powered train was state of the art, the best travel that money could buy. The Chicago Cubs stretched out in the spacious Pullman cars, ate scrumptious meals, and puffed on cigars in the smoking car. Those with pregame jitters played poker, while the relaxed folks slept in red-curtained compartments as the train whizzed through the night air toward its destination.

After breakfast on October 8, 1908, the *Twentieth Century Limited* pulled into the New York station from which the Cubs would depart and prepare to play the New York Giants.

Had Mordecai seen the morning edition of the *New York Times*, he would have read the headline “Giants and Cubs in Final Battle.” *Battle* was a fitting term. By defeating the Pittsburgh Pirates in their last game of the season, the Cubs had assured themselves of at least a tie for first with the Giants. A tie is what they had gotten, and so the Cubs would face the New York team for what was essentially a playoff.

The Cubs and the Giants were rivals, and because of an earlier game that had ended in a tie on a technicality, they were also enemies. The *New York Times* said: “Although the regular scheduled National League baseball season ended yesterday . . . it will not officially close until this afternoon when New York and Chicago will play off the tie game of September 23, making to-day [sic] the most important baseball event in the season of 1908.”<sup>1</sup>

When the team’s train pulled up to the Grand Central Depot, thousands of hostile New Yorkers turned out to pound the train windows and jeer.

Despite an injury-filled season, Mordecai’s team had managed to stay in the hunt for first. Several teams had jockeyed for position all summer long. The race was so tight no one could predict the outcome. This uncertainty raised the stakes for gamblers and lured

the common man to make a bet and hope for a fortune. Money, more than fan loyalty, motivated the hostile crowd.

The Chicago teammates huddled together and bulldozed through the crowd like a football team running offense. Police provided an escort to the hotel. When the players reached the registry, more threatening letters awaited.

Still, Chance's men were confident. The team had come off a good streak of games. The only way the Cubs had managed to stay close to first place was by winning 23 of their 31 games in September.

Mordecai had come too far to lose everything now. Earlier in the summer he had suffered the death of his mother. His sister had also been ill. He was not alone, as several teammates had experienced hardships as well. The Cubs clubhouse sometimes looked more like a battleground than a locker room. Tempers flared; punches were thrown—and not just between the players. Fistfights also frequently broke out between the manager and his men. Still, after all they'd been through—the fights, the injuries—the season's end brought the possibility of a championship.

After wiggling through the crowd, the players traveled to the Polo Grounds on the elevated train. In a pregame gathering in the clubhouse, Chance announced his starter, Jack "The Giant Killer" Pfiester.

Chance pulled Mordecai aside. "Warm up behind the outfield fence."

The Polo Grounds were filled to the brim, overflowing, bursting at the seams. Every available seat, every vacant speck of ground, every rooftop was filled with a black-suited man or a suspender-clad youth. A few ladies wearing Merry Widow hats blocked spectators' views, but their attire contributed splashes of color to the scene.

The sound was deafening inside the ballpark, creating a roar like a locust invasion. Outside, an army of frustrated New York-

ers lunged at the park walls. The gates had closed early because the Polo Grounds could not hold all those demanding to see the game. Police and firemen attempted to control the throng. Thousands were shouting for blood—Chicago Cubs blood.

Giants fans believed the pennant had been stolen from them on a technicality. The New York papers had proclaimed the news. Many people had bet everything they owned on their Giants to win, and lives were seriously at stake. This was more than a game.

Beyond the clamor, above the throng, the sky was a beautiful autumn blue. The day was pleasantly warm. Somewhere perhaps, beyond the Big Apple, folks were enjoying Indian summer. But inside the Polo Grounds, and for miles outside, only one thing mattered to the people: the Giants had to win.

Prior to the match the New York squad, looking like snarling beasts, pushed the Cubs away from the field, not allowing the visitors more than five minutes of batting practice.

“You’re finished,” Giants pitcher Big Joe McGinnity said, pushing Chance, who had been hitting grounders from the plate. His statement likely inferred more than just the end of batting practice.

It would have been tempting for Chance’s men to try to settle the score right then and teach those New York players who really deserved the pennant. But they kept their cool, preferring for once to act like grown men instead of impulsive hotheads. They were determined not to take the bait. They’d make their statement on the field, with their bats and their gloves.

When the game got under way, the noisy masses were too much for Pfister, who ran into trouble in the first inning. Summoned from the center-field bullpen, Mordecai made his way to the field. Fans with faces twisted into angry glares and fists pounding the air tried to block his path.

“You’re finished in this town!”

Glass bottles whizzed past Brown. Rocks and bricks had to be cleared from the playing field. Mordecai knew he could be injured—or worse. There weren't enough police officers to control the crowd. Someone might have a gun.

“Hey, Three Finger! You big, old—”

Mordecai shouted back, “Get the hell out of my way. . . . Here's where you ‘black hand’ guys get your chance. If I'm going to get killed I sure know that I'll die before a capacity crowd.”<sup>2</sup>

Who was that man? What caused him to show such bravery? There was more to worry about that day than just winning or losing. If the Cubs won, as they intended to do, what then? After the game ended, the Chicago Cubs would be encircled by a swarm of livid people resembling killer bees.

Did Mordecai Brown hear what the fans were calling him? Did he know what they threatened to do to him?

We don't know whether he considered those things. To understand his actions that day, one has to go back to the beginning, before he was a star, before he ever set foot in Chicago or New York or Philadelphia or any of the cities he played in. His life has to be studied from that point forward in order to understand not only who he was but also how he was able to achieve such a high level of success in the face of many obstacles.

Mordecai Brown's story is more than just that of a man who overcame the loss of fingers on his pitching hand to become a Hall of Famer. It's more than the story of a man who escaped the coal mines to become popular enough to have his photograph taken with the U.S. president. His story is more than just that of a ball-player—but it is that too. Brown's life is a tapestry. To understand the whole, one has to look at all the threads to see how they were woven together. By doing so, the legacy of this remarkable man springs to life, inspires us, and sends us on our way to face our own obstacles.

The events of October 8, 1908, the day of the playoff game that determined the National League pennant, provide a summary of Three Finger Brown's identity, but that day is only a starting point. Life is more than baseball, but sometimes life's challenges are played out on the diamond.