

Table of Contents

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	vii
<i>Foreword by Dave Kindred</i>	1
<i>Introduction</i>	5
1. In the Shadow of Kennesaw Mountain	9
2. The Chattanooga Kid	16
3. Rookie Season	27
4. The Hot Corner	39
5. “The Unknown Slugger”	57
6. Trade Winds and the Florida Flu	71
7. Back in the Box	83
8. First in Hits	94
9. America’s Team	116
10. World Champs	131
11. Going Home	140
<i>Epilogue: “I’m Not Sorry I Played”</i>	156
<i>Appendix: Batting Statistics of Cecil Travis</i>	165
<i>Chapter Notes</i>	167
<i>Bibliography</i>	173
<i>Index</i>	177

1

In the Shadow of Kennesaw Mountain

To many baseball fans, the name *Kennesaw Mountain* conjures up images of the wild-eyed commissioner with the surname Landis who has been both credited with saving the game of baseball after the 1919 Black Sox scandal and vilified for opposing the integration of the game. In fact, Kennesaw Mountain Landis (who spelled his first name with just one *n*) got his monolithic nickname from a twin-humped mountain in Georgia.

The name *Kennesaw* is derived from the Cherokee *Gah-nee-sah*, meaning “cemetery” or “burial ground”—a fitting origin, given the battle that would one day take place there. Standing near Marietta, Georgia, Kennesaw Mountain housed a Confederate signal station during the Civil War. In one of many stops along what historian Bruce Canton called the “macabre dance” between Major General William Tecumseh Sherman and General Joseph E. Johnston of the Confederate army, Sherman led an attack on Johnston’s forces near Kennesaw on June 27, 1864. As Sherman paused to ponder the site of what would turn out to be one of the most costly episodes of his famous charge to the sea, he noted, “the summits were crowned with batteries, and the spurs were alive with men busy in felling trees, digging pits, and preparing for the grand struggle impending. The scene was enchanting; too beautiful to be disturbed by the harsh clamor of war.”¹

Sherman mistakenly thought that Johnston had stretched his forces in the region too thin. The resulting Northern offensive would be known as the Battle of Kennesaw Mountain. Of the estimated 4,000 military casualties from the battle, only 1,000 were on the Confederate side. At least one of those 1,000 Confederate soldiers felled in the bloody battle bore the surname of Travis. It was an era when generations grew up on the same land, and the Travises had lived in northern Georgia since Revolutionary times.²

A descendant of the Confederate soldier, James B. Travis lived and worked a 200-acre farm in Riverdale, a small farming town which lies 12 miles out of Atlanta and two counties south of Kennesaw Mountain. In 1901, at the age of 39, James married a woman named Ada, 10 years his junior. According to census data, James and Ada Travis raised 10 children: five boys and five girls. Cecil, the youngest of the clan, would grow up to become one of the best baseball players to ever come out of the state of Georgia.

Cecil Howell Travis was born on the Travis farm on August 8, 1913. On the day of his birth, a 16-page edition of the *Atlanta Constitution* carried a cover story on the lurid trial of Leo Frank, the 29-year-old supervisor at the National Pencil Factory in Atlanta who was charged with the rape and murder of Mary Phagan, a 13-year-old employee at the factory. Earlier in the year, the *Atlanta Constitution* had carried a story in which a brothel owner named Nina Formby claimed that a man named “Leo” had telephoned her and demanded a room for himself and a young girl, telling her, “It’s a matter of life and death.” Although many witness testified that Frank, a Cornell University graduate and president of the Atlanta chapter of the B’Nai B’rith, was home entertaining friends at the time of the rape and murder, Frank would be found guilty and sentenced to death by hanging. The following June, governor John Slaton, who believed that Frank was innocent, commuted Frank’s sentence to life in prison. But on August 16, a group called the Knights of Mary Phagan — which later re-christened themselves as an order of the Ku Klux Klan — kidnapped Frank from his jail cell, drove him to Fey’s Grove on the outskirts of Marietta, and lynched him in the early morning of August 17.

Expressing a sentiment at the heart of the war in which Cecil’s ancestor had lost his life, a *Macon Telegraph* editorial addressed the gruesome turn of events, saying, “The men who lynched Leo Frank went ahead with clear consciences. It would never have happened had the rest of the nation left this state to mind its own business.”³ The rest of the nation reacted with outrage. The *San Francisco Bulletin* said, “Georgia is mad with her own virtue, cruel, unreasoning, blood thirsty, barbarous. She is not civilized. She is not Christian. She is not sane.” The *Chicago Tribune* concluded, “The South is a region of illiteracy, blatant self-righteousness, cruelty and violence.” The *Boston Post* asked: “Is Georgia in America?”⁴

Nina Formby later recanted her story, claiming that Atlanta police detectives had gotten her drunk and coerced her testimony against Frank. The state of Georgia posthumously pardoned Leo Frank in 1986.

1 • *In the Shadow of Kennesaw Mountain*

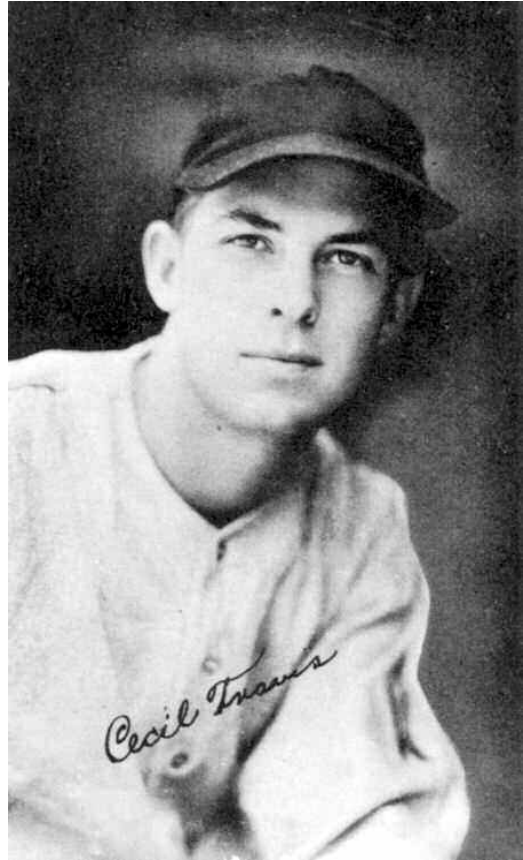
Cecil Travis, a man who would one day serve as an important symbol in the efforts to integrate baseball, was born 12 miles away from Atlanta, on the 200-acre farm in Riverdale on which the Travis family raised livestock and grew cotton. Now officially a city, Riverdale was then, as one Travis interviewer has described, “little more than a marker on the road in the farming community.”⁵ The town was named after Spratin Rivers, a local landowner who had provided right-of-way to the railroad.

Like his five older brothers, Cecil grew up working on his family’s rural Riverdale estate. On the 1930 Census, James Travis’s sons (ranging from Cecil, 16, to Emery, 30) were registered as being single and, simply, “laborers” on the farm. (Interestingly, in the field for “Occupation,” Cecil’s mother, Ada, was originally listed as a “housewife,” but

the census worker crossed that out and wrote “none.”⁶) “I naturally had my share of farm work to do ... but being the youngest of the children, escaped much of the hard work,” Travis later remembered.⁷

“[T]here wasn’t as much to do as there is today,” he said of farm life in Riverdale. Baseball was one pastime for Travis, and his brothers played amateur ball, as well. “All we did was play ball. Didn’t matter if we use rocks or sticks just as long as we were playing. I just learned the game by playing it.”⁸ He even used spare moments during chores to refine his hitting technique: “Instead of chopping cotton, I’d pick up rocks and whack ’em with my hoe.”⁹

Travis attended Bethsaida Elementary School¹⁰ and then, in 1927, began his courses at the Fayetteville High School. It was there that he first



A young Cecil Travis, looking wide-eyed and cherubic early in his career. (Transcendental Graphics)

developed a serious interest in baseball. One of his teachers, Roy Hodgson, had been an athlete at the University of Georgia. Hodgson formed a baseball team in Travis's freshman year and "coached the youngsters and placed them in the lineup where he believed them most suited."¹¹ Travis hit from the left side but threw right-handed, and Hodgson had Cecil play shortstop, the position where the best players on youth teams are often placed. Travis was tall and thin, even lanky, with an unusual body type for a middle infielder, but Hodgson knew baseball and saw talent in the young player. So Travis played shortstop that year and developed an affinity for the position.

The school stopped fielding a team after that one season, but Cecil was able to play during the summer months, in between his farm chores. "I had the baseball bug and cut work short to go to Fayetteville whenever there was a game."¹² The Flint River League was an amateur league that featured games between teams from such towns as Jonesburg, Fairburn, and Fayetteville, for whom Cecil played.

While playing in the Flint River League, Cecil began to display the natural hitting ability that would distinguish him throughout his pro career. Legend of the sweet-swinging kid from Riverdale first grew out of this amateur league. Cecil graduated in the spring of 1930, and he was offered scholarships to three local colleges: Georgia Tech University, the University of Georgia, and Oglethorpe University.¹³ He initially planned to go to Georgia Tech — and even had a room all set at the school — until he met a man named Kid Elberfeld.

"They ran a baseball school in 1931 in Atlanta, and some of the fellas that played on the Jonesburg team, they went up there to the school and told Kid Elberfeld about me playing against them," Travis recounted 60 years later.¹⁴ Elberfeld, an ex-major leaguer, was president of Tubby Walton's Baseball University in Atlanta. The school was named after William Hewlett "Tubby" Walton. Tubby Walton was a large, jovial man known amongst Atlanta sandlots for his good nature. He once ran a café named Tubby's Home-Cooked Meals, which he had to shut down when he realized he was giving away more meals through the back door of the café than he was selling to paying customers. Walton was what was known then as a "bird dog," or freelance scout. He developed young players at his "university" and then shopped their rights to professional teams. He also ran a touring team, Tubby Walton's Firecrackers, which gave his students a chance to refine their playing skills.

Once, Walton had informed Elberfeld that he'd discovered "a little boy that can hit a curve ball."

"Ain't no boy can hit a curve ball, Bird," Elberfeld replied.

1 • In the Shadow of Kennesaw Mountain

“This boy kin. Look a little like a Indian and kin hit a curve ball.”

Elberfeld told him to bring the player to the school, which in truth consisted of a “skin diamond and a chicken-wire backstop” in Almand Park. Elberfeld later remembered: “I got this pitcher who was sorta mean. Later got in jail. I tole him to knock this Indian down and then curve him. This mean boy low-bridged him, then that Indian-looking boy hit the next curve 10 miles.” The “Indian-looking boy” was named Luke Appling. Elberfeld accepted Appling to the school, and later he got Appling signed to a pro contract for the Atlanta Crackers of the South Association.¹⁵ Appling would go on to a Hall of Fame career as a shortstop in the Majors.

Walton also had the distinction of discovering Johnny Mize, the future Hall of Famer slugger. When he first saw Mize playing in the North Georgia hills, Walton claimed that Mize “flogged a line drive that hit a hickory tree 500 feet from home, so hard hickor’ nuts kept falling for five minutes.”¹⁶

The circumstances of Travis’s discovery were similar to that of Appling’s. A student of the school, a boy named Leroy Waldrop, told Walton that he knew “a boy out in Clayton County that could hit anybody.”

“Ain’t nobody kin hit anybody, Leroy,” Walton responded.

“This boy kin,” the youth asserted, “but he can’t get away.” He then explained the commitment that Cecil had to his family and the farm. Intrigued, Walton told Waldrop to bring Travis to the school at nine o’clock the next morning, and that Travis would be a guest of the school while Waldrop gave him a look.

The next morning, Waldrop brought Travis, who showed up wearing tennis shoes and white duck pants. Walton greeted the youth and told him to pick out a bat and swing at some pitched balls. While Walton noted that the rest of his students would always choose models bearing the signatures of their favorite players— Babe Ruth, Al Simmons, Jimmie Foxx — Travis simply picked up a random bat and strode to the plate to face a pitcher named Hugh Casey, an ex-con who’d done time on a chain gang. Walton remembers: “I told ol’ Hughie to bear down, and this lean ol’ plow-boy hit a line drive off him, and kept hitting ’em.”¹⁷ And “that boy hit every mean thing that ex-con could throw at him.”¹⁸

But could he field? Unfortunately, that week had seen so much rainfall that the school’s diamond had been rendered unusable for any substantial fielding practice. So Elberfeld took Cecil to his home in Atlanta. He had Cecil stand at one end of his living room, and from the other end, Elberfeld hit grounders to Travis over a rug surface. Apparently, Travis evidenced enough skill in fielding ground balls in a domestic setting. Both Elberfeld and Walton were thrilled at the chance to have Cecil as a prized pupil at their struggling school.

Travis also felt that he had found his true calling. He would later recount:

I had a good mind to go there on my own hook, but at the time was torn between two emotions. First, I had an ambition to become a professional ball player; second, I had the choice of going to one of three colleges. It was a difficult decision to make, but I finally decided to take a chance with Walton and Elberfeld and try to make my own money.¹⁹

Not surprisingly, Travis's family was reluctant to see Cecil turn down a chance to attend college on a scholarship — and at a time when the nation's economy was reeling from the effects of the great stock market crash that had occurred in October 1929. "My parents were not enthused," Travis admitted. "I think they and my siblings were ready to carry me off to Georgia Tech."²⁰ Despite the standing scholarship offer from Georgia Tech, the 17-year-old Travis had the two men accompany him back to Riverdale and talk to his father. As they drove up the hill that led to the Travis farm, Cecil reportedly said, "Mistuh Walton, get Pa to let me plow and play baseball, too."²¹

Walton and Elberfeld met with James Travis on the porch of the Travis house and told him about their baseball school. They brought with them a contract that would give Travis a scholarship to the Tubby Walton school. In exchange for the scholarship, Travis the player would essentially become the property of the school. The elder Travis sat in his rocking chair and closely read the contract.

"It sounds like he's joining the chain gang," he commented.

"It does sound like that," Walton admitted, "but they'll pay him for his work. They don't pay on the chain gangs."²²

Seventeen-year-old Cecil signed the contract and returned to Atlanta with Walton and Elberfeld. Elberfeld took it upon himself to tutor Cecil personally. Kid Elberfeld had been known as "The Scrappy Kid" during his playing days, which, as H.G. Salsinger noted, was "no mean distinction since at the time major league rosters were filled with gents who made pugnacity their main virtue."²³ In fact, legend has it that Elberfeld used to file the spikes of his cleats in order to make them more dangerous to fielders when attempting to tag him out or turn double plays.

Elberfeld, perhaps seeing something of himself in Cecil, taught the third base position to the youngster. Unfortunately, the school was due to close for the season in only a couple of days. But Elberfeld saw potential in Travis, and he took him to visit a number of Southern Association teams, including the Atlanta Crackers and the Little Rock Travelers, shopping the youngster's talents.

1 • In the Shadow of Kennesaw Mountain

It was the spring of 1931, and in Elberfeld's hometown of Chattanooga, the Lookouts farm team was about to begin training for the upcoming season. Elberfeld took Cecil under his wing and arranged for him to work out with the Lookouts team. Travis would remember:

Elberfeld made me feel right at home. In fact, he took me to his home, where I had my meals and slept. During the evenings Elberfeld talked nothing but baseball to me. He was a third baseman and a shortstop in his day and he gave me many pointers that helped me a great deal. Even when I was working out with the Lookouts, Elberfeld frequently called me to one side and corrected a fault, or told me how to do a certain thing.²⁴

Cecil was just one of 108 fresh, young students of the Tubby Walton school whom Elberfeld had brought to Chattanooga for a tryout that spring. But Cecil showed enough standout ability in his workouts to make a favorable impression on Lookouts manager Bert Niehoff and team president Joe Engel. They gave Elberfeld a \$200 finder's fee and signed Travis to a contract with Chattanooga.

Cecil was still green to the world of professional ball, and Niehoff already had a third baseman named Rube Lutzke. So Niehoff gave him the option of either sitting the bench with the Lookouts or playing for a semi-pro team in Newport, Tennessee, where Travis could gain more playing time. Travis remembered: "I told them as long as they'd pay me, I'd rather go up there and play, so I went up there and played."²⁵ So Travis went north to Newport, with Niehoff's promise that the youngster would get another chance with the Lookouts before the end of the 1931 season.

According to Travis's later recollection, he hit .400 while playing shortstop at Newport that summer.²⁶ But he was not getting paid while playing for the semipro team. Discouraged, Travis considered going home to Riverdale and giving up thoughts of playing pro ball. But before he could, Niehoff made good on his promise and recalled Travis to the Chattanooga squad in August.

In the summer of 1931, as Connie Mack's Philadelphia Athletics and the hard-nosed St. Louis Cardinals were running away with the American and National Leagues, respectively, Travis took advantage of his second chance in Chattanooga. The 18-year-old collected 15 hits in 35 at bats for an average of .429. Travis's run was a brief flurry at the end of a minor league season, but it foretold the rapid rise of one of the game's next great hitters.