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Chapter

Bluegrass Boy

Some men start at the bottom and work their way to the top. My daddy, the late Commissioner of Baseball and Kentucky Senator Albert B. “Happy” Chandler, was that kind of man. In one incredible lifetime he went from dirt poor to the Governor’s Mansion, the halls of Congress, and baseball’s Hall of Fame.

The apple of my life fell near Daddy’s formidable tree, but through a twist of fate rolled hundreds of miles west and came to rest in Las Vegas. My youth held the promise of great things, but I missed the off-ramp to respectability and wound up in the heart of the wiseguy wonderland.

Which reminds me of a story. A son approaches his father for \$100 because he’s going on a trip. Instead of giving his boy good advice, the father says, “Here’s \$200, son, go twice as far.”

Born the youngest son of one of the most popular men in the United States, I started at the top and have spent a lifetime working my way to the middle. Along the way, I’ve met scores of the famous and infamous and have played the gracious host to every one while always trying to remember the lessons my daddy taught me. I have found as often as not that there are some lessons in life that only experience can teach.

In thirty years in the Las Vegas casino business at Caesars Palace and other resorts, I've seen what the power of money can do to a man. In that time, I've befriended a Hall of Fame's worth of sports celebrities, have gotten to know on intimate terms many of the biggest names in entertainment from the latter half of the 20th century, and have bumped into everyone from Presidents to alleged associates of organized crime.

After decades away from Kentucky, I remain unindicted and seldom uninvited.

This is my story, but it begins with the man they called Happy.



Daddy was born Albert Benjamin Chandler on July 14, 1898, near Corydon, a small farming community in east-central Kentucky in Henderson County. The Chandler clan came to Kentucky from Virginia in the 1830s and were fruit farmers in Corydon. The first family member born in Kentucky was my great-grandfather, Daniel Madison Chandler, who is remembered as a “reckless and daring” man who served as a second sergeant with Confederate General John Hunt Morgan’s raiders. (Although I’ve often been described as “reckless and daring,” I’ve tried to make it a habit to do the best I could for my team and play for the winning side. My daddy often said his grandfather was “shot in the heel at Shiloh.” At Shiloh, the Confederates were all leaving in a hurry.)

Daddy’s young life was defined by hard work and heartache. I am undoubtedly biased in this area, but it’s my opinion that my father’s boyhood remembrance of the day his mother abandoned the family is one of the saddest passages in the language. He recounted it in his autobiography with Vance Trimble, *Heroes, Plain Folks, and Skunks*:

“Angry voices came from the bedroom. My mother and father were quarreling. She was packing her suitcase. Out at the front gate someone waited in a buggy. My mother was leaving home, abandoning us. I was just four years old. This is my earliest memory.

“‘Do you want to take the children?’ my father asked.

“‘I’ll take Robert,’ she said. ‘I don’t want Albert — he looks too much like you.’

“My father shook his head. ‘No. If you don’t want both — just leave them with me.’

“I followed mother out to the buggy, crying. Dusk was beginning to settle over our little Kentucky hamlet. She gave us two boys a quick kiss, and Robert a long, long hug. The buggy wheels crunched off toward the depot. I sat down at the gate and tears rolled down my cheeks.”

If that passage doesn’t choke you up, read no further because nothing I have to tell you from here on out will match it. To add to Daddy’s heartbreak, he lost his little brother, Robert, to a farming accident just a few years later. Then it was only him and his father, Joseph Sephus Chandler.

Daddy’s rejection by his mother drove him the rest of his life and affected all his relationships. He managed to meet her years later, but they were never reconciled. “As far as a normal mother-and-son relationship goes, we just never had it,” he wrote in his autobiography.

Daddy’s nickname was Happy because of his ever-present smile, but beneath that smiling surface burned a fire of white-hot intensity. My father could not accept defeat in himself or his family and was especially exacting on his children despite the fact that he himself was rarely in the picture at our home in Versailles. That pressure was manifested in many ways on us, but it had tempered him like steel.

My father achieved great things in his life. Born Albert Benjamin Chandler, he became the youngest governor in America when he was elected in 1935, and he was the youngest man in the United States Senate when he entered it in 1939. He was the first man in the history of the commonwealth, which did not allow its governors to sit for consecutive four-year terms, to be re-elected. After serving as Commissioner of Baseball, he returned to the Governor’s Mansion in 1955.

To say his children were proud of him doesn't begin to describe our state of mind, but his enormous success was a little intimidating. Although we didn't know it at the time, walking in those formidable shoes would be impossible — though Lord how we tried.



Each child plays a role in his family. The Chandler family got a head start, as Daddy liked to call it, when eldest sister Marcella was born. She had been the only salvageable commodity from Mama's brief first marriage and was a fine and devoted daughter. Next came Mildred, followed by Ben. I arrived late to the party as usual, October 17, 1933.

As the son of an aspiring politician, I grew up standing on the edge of big crowds of people as they listened to my father's off-the-cuff speeches and rousing renditions of "My Old Kentucky Home," "There's a Gold Mine in the Sky," "Sonny Boy," and "Happy Days Are Here Again."

By 1935 the Chandlers were in the Governor's Mansion in Frankfort. This is the atmosphere I was born into. Don't you know it was quite a disappointment when I learned that the People's House wasn't ours to keep.

As the youngest of the four Chandler offspring, I soon discovered that many of the traditional family roles were already filled. As the second-born male child, I quickly found that the job of rock-solid responsible son had been taken by big brother Ben. Almost from the start Ben appeared destined to maintain the family honor and tradition and to please my father and mother. Proof of that is his operation of the *Woodford Sun*, the only newspaper in the county. Since the 1950s Ben has been a voice of reason and a reliable provider of information for his community. Daddy bought that newspaper as a personal house organ, and when it came time to pass it on he looked to Ben, who has always been a tough act to follow in the maturity department.

There's no doubt that Ben was Daddy's shining son, for Happy was never shy about expressing the opinion. In fact, he made a point of mentioning it in his autobiography. "Ben, of course, is the favorite. Every time Mama hollers, he shows up. They get along so well together. Ben loves that paper and Mama has been writing a column for the *Woodford Sun* for thirty years."

Then there's sister Mimi, the apple of Daddy's eye. Mimi was marvelously dramatic as a child and went on to act in Hollywood as a contract player at Paramount Studios before returning to Versailles and her own people. She later served as Kentucky's Commissioner of Tourism.

One of my favorite memories of Mimi was when she and Mama would shuffle off to Keeneland to make a day of it at the races. They'd have more fun playing the horses at two dollars a race than anyone I've seen before or since. Dad, on the other hand, never placed a bet, smoked a cigarette, or had a drink of whiskey. Racetracks served one purpose for him: They gave him a captive audience so he could work the crowd.

One time Happy, seeing the girls prepare for another day at the track, decided to become a bookmaker for a day.

"I'll book all your bets today," he said.

They reluctantly agreed and made their picks hours before the first post. Then they slumped off to the track, some of the fun gone out of their naturally sunny dispositions.

Well, the first race came through a winner. Then the second one hit. Before you know it, they'd cleaned up at the track on the only day my daddy ever acted as a one-man pari-mutuel. The girls made a small fortune, their winnings all the sweeter considering the source.

Mama and Mimi were once photographed at Churchill Downs attending the races, which wouldn't have been newsworthy had Daddy as Commissioner of Baseball not been attempting to crack down on gambling. He'd even banned players from going to the track. So that photo made a good gotcha story, but Daddy chilled

out the sports press by responding, “What team do they have a contract with?”

To say I tried to please my father is something of an understatement. In simplest terms, I worshipped the ground he walked on. Forget that he was almost always either headed out the door on business or headed back through the door after a trip to New York, Washington, or Chicago. Or that there were times I saw more of him in the newspapers than at the kitchen table. None of that mattered to a boy hopelessly smitten with the image of the most liked man in Kentucky and, next to Will Rogers and a few others, one of the nation’s favorite sons.

As the second son of a favorite son, I accepted my role and made the best of it.

Daddy wasn’t one of those sensitive types. He left the nurturing to Mama. His role was strictly disciplinary in nature, and he wasn’t shy about going to the switch to get the results he desired. It was crude but effective behavior modification, but it would be a mistake to say it was a good substitute for actual fathering. In some years Daddy was around less than some comets — although he burned as brightly on a national stage. In fact, big brother Ben for a time took to calling him “Uncle Daddy” in sincere confusion over his place in the family pecking order.

Once at home, however, he was quick to assert his authority. He went to the whip faster than Willie Shoemaker. He wrote in his autobiography, “Dan was more clever. He knew the whipping would stop as soon as tears came.

“Definitely I was rough on ’em. Dan misbehaved and I ordered him upstairs. I stood by the stairs and helped boot him up. ‘I’m introducing my shoemaker to your tailor,’ I told him.”

That’s precisely accurate, and I can almost feel those punts to this day.

As Commissioner of Baseball, Daddy was focused on the issues of the day, the greatest of which was the potential — most owners called it the “threat” — of integrating the game. After World War II, it was clear to anyone with eyes that the Negro Leagues fielded players who were well qualified to play in the National or American League. Question was, how would white fans react? Because once you let them on the field, you couldn’t very well deny them access to the box seats. It was a complex issue that all America hung on.

Of course, there was other business on Daddy’s agenda. Near the top of the list was what to do with Brooklyn Dodgers Manager Leo Durocher. “Leo the Lip” had been a classic scrappy infielder who was transitioned into a pugnacious manager. But it wasn’t his managerial skills that were controversial with Dad. It was his inability to stay away from big gamblers and bookmakers and guys who took their fedoras and overcoats very seriously. Dad suspended Leo, and years later when I was at Caesars and Leo was still hanging around the fedora-and-overcoat set as well as Frank Sinatra, he found out my lineage and maintained his grudge against my father by proxy. He made it clear he hated my guts, and I rapidly got to the point where the feeling was mutual. Nature, in my humble opinion, has made no more difficult creature to handicap than the little man.

Dad told Dodgers owner Branch Rickey, “It looks like you can’t take care of him. Let me take care of him for you.”

After all, Durocher had busted a heckler’s jaw and had been running around with the wiseguy gambler crowd.

“If I made any error, it was on the side of being too lenient. Just suspending him for a year was no great thing. I could have put him out for life, it would have been justified. One year wasn’t any big deal. I signed thirty-six death warrants as Governor, so it wasn’t anything for me to get excited about.”

Daddy wasn’t through shaking up the game. He didn’t hesitate to suspend the players who jumped to the Mexican League chasing the promise of big pesos. Unlike Durocher, who got a one-year sentence, the Mexican Leaguers were hit with five-year suspensions.

But historians remember Dad as the players' commissioner — and for good reason. He championed their first pension program and carved out a deal that helped it get funded through a contract he negotiated with the Gillette Safety Razor Company in exchange for letting them advertise during the telecast of the World Series and All-Star games.



In January 1947, Baseball's owners had a secret meeting at the Waldorf Astoria to consider Rickey's proposal to bring a little-known infielder named Jackie Robinson up from Triple-A Montreal to the Big Leagues in the coming season. Ordinarily, there'd be no need for such secrecy, but this was no ordinary infielder. This man was black, and Major League Baseball had never had a Negro player. The vote was taken and only Mr. Rickey voted for his bold idea. The ballot was 15 to 1 against integrating the great American pastime.

Rickey went from New York to Versailles on the Dodgers' Beechcraft and met Daddy there at the cabin. It was a very emotional time and its importance was not lost on us children. Race riots were predicted at the Polo Grounds, which stood in Harlem. And there was a genuine possibility that the game's many Southern players and fans would boycott. Rickey was a great man, but the fact is he saw Robinson as a sound economic move that might get his Dodgers a long-sought World Series title. "I'd play an elephant with pink horns if it could win the pennant," Rickey once said. But in those days an elephant would have been more accepted.

Daddy didn't hesitate. He easily could have gone the old racist route of his predecessor, Commissioner Landis, who'd had many opportunities to integrate the game and had managed to avoid every one, the last coming shortly before his death in 1944. Daddy never lacked a sense of purpose and understood his place in history.

In his autobiography he recalled telling Rickey: "I've already done a lot of thinking about this whole racial situation in our country. As a member of the Senate Military Affairs Committee, I got to know

a lot about our casualties during the war. Plenty of Negro boys were willing to go out and fight and die for this country. Is it right when they came back to tell them they can't play the national pastime? You know, Branch, I'm going to have to meet my Maker some day and if He asks me why I didn't let this boy play and I say it's because he's black, that might not be a satisfactory answer.

"If the Lord made some people black, and some white, and some red or yellow, he must have had a pretty good reason. It isn't my job to decide which colors can play big league baseball. It is my job to see that the game is fairly played and that everybody has an equal chance. I think if I do that, I can face my Maker with a clear conscience."

And he did — to the intense anger of the fifteen owners. Jackie Robinson was brought up to the Dodgers on April 10, 1947 — one day after Daddy suspended Brooklyn manager Leo Durocher for gambling and his associations. It was all too much for the press to fathom, and somehow Rickey was credited with breaking the color line and Daddy was blamed for suspending the feisty Durocher.

Robinson's progress remained on the front of the sports page, but his success on the field went a long way toward relieving the pressure of the situation.



Daddy's seven-year term as commissioner expired in 1951. He sought to renew his contract, for he cherished the duty despite its difficulties, but Yankees owner Del Webb led a group of owners against him and prevented him from securing the 75 percent majority necessary to renew his contract. There were three votes in Sarasota, Florida, that winter to consider whether to retain Dad's contract. The votes were 9 to 7, 11 to 5, and 9 to 7 — all in favor of renewing.

It was the only election he ever won and yet lost the job.

The owners made overtures to FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover, who scoffed at them and said, “After the way you treated Governor Chandler, I wouldn’t touch it with a ten-foot pole.”

At a testimonial dinner held for Daddy not long after he left baseball, his friend Bob Hope chimed in, “This is the biggest crowd I’ve ever seen come out to honor a fellow who’s just been fired!”

But Daddy could always draw a crowd. Instead of sulking, he charged right back in to Kentucky politics and by 1955 was elected to a historic second term as Governor, this time by a record-setting landslide.

Again he was called upon to do the right thing when others were shying away from their duty. Following the U.S. Supreme Court’s decision that “separate but equal” was no longer acceptable in public institutions such as schools, Arkansas Governor Orval Faubus called out the troops to block the schoolyard gate. Daddy could proudly say he called out the National Guard to make sure those gates stayed open.

Daddy was not a man with a small opinion of himself or his abilities. I planned to blossom in his long shadow, which as any amateur horticulturist knows is a nearly impossible task.