

Chapter 2

July 21, 1940

Summers in Southern Illinois are hot, and July 1940 was hotter and more humid than most. Sesser is a small country town in “downstate” Illinois, ninety miles southeast of St. Louis. Although the entire country had suffered from the ravages of the Great Depression, this small coal mining town had been particularly hard hit. Ten years into the economic misery and not a sign of recovery was anywhere to be seen. Once a thriving little mining town, Sesser and its coal mine, Big Ben #9, were now all but spent. Only a skeleton crew remained to work the mine.

Dirt-poor and seemingly dying, Sesser had its interesting quirks. The town’s single strand of Christmas lights spanned Main Street between the old decaying Sesser Opera House and the now-closed Miners Building and Loan. The lights stayed up year-round, but were only switched on between Thanksgiving and New Year’s Day.

Although most of Sesser’s once-bustling downtown area was now empty, Bruno’s Mine Shaft Inn, the local tap, was always busy. The town’s men gathered there every evening to drown their sorrows in St. Louis’s finest: Busch Beer. Bruno’s atmosphere was dark and dingy. The elegant cherry woodwork had once reflected the craftsmanship of years past. Now, in 1940, the wood was chipped and dusty. Although clean, the hardwood floor creaked with every step and was in desperate need of refinishing.

Hanging on the wall, opposite the bar that stretched from the front window to the back of the long narrow room, was a reprint of the painting

“Last Stand at The Alamo.” The art had been commissioned by the now defunct Radeke Brewing Company of Kankakee and distributed to local beer joints in 1919. The old and dusty print featured Davy Crockett and his coonskin cap, swinging his trusted musket ‘Ole Betsy’ as a club to knock attacking Mexicans off the wall. The beautifully framed print was the focal point at Bruno’s, and never failed to elicit animated discussion. The Alamo was one of America’s defining moments, and it was not hard for the patrons to see similarities between the storm that engulfed the small mission and the tidal wave of despair and bad luck that had swept across Sesser. The town was now as dead as Crockett himself.

The talk in Bruno’s usually centered on the misery of its patrons. The drought had turned their farms into dust bowls. Only paltry bits of coal were coming from the mine. Few had enough to eat, and many had nothing at all except what others were willing to share. Although there were many things to argue and disagree about, one thing nearly everyone in Sesser agreed upon: President Hoover had sold their lives down the river.

“You vote Republican, and you’ll pick shit with the chickens,” Bruno Pilate regularly proclaimed from behind the bar. His statement was always answered by raised glasses and salutes to President Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

There was also a popular topic of conversation of a more positive variety: “the kid.” Sesser’s townsfolk didn’t have much, but they loved their baseball. “The kid” who was causing all the talk was a young local named Gene Moore, a teenager from a dirt-poor family living on the east side of the tracks. Gene had been tearing up the Sesser ball diamond, or what the locals called “The Lumberyard,” in a loose reference to the faded sign hanging on the centerfield fence advertising “Huie Lumber.”

The Cardinals were the favorite Major League team in these parts, but a trip to St. Louis and a ticket to the game were just a dream. So Sesser folk loved their Egyptians. The Southern Illinois team was a semi-pro organization made up of has-been players and young up-and-comers. On paper, the average age of the Egyptians was 27. Gene pulled the average down and skewed the true make-up of the team, however, because he had just turned 15. The Egyptians were the pride and joy of not just Sesser, but all of Southern Illinois. For reasons long since forgotten, this region of the state was known as “Little Egypt.” Gene was the team’s starting

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The only known picture of Gene Moore playing with the Sesser Egyptians, circa 1940. “The Pride of the Egyptians,” 15-year-old Gene, is standing in the back row, fourth from the left.

catcher, and was quickly becoming well known across the state—and beyond.

In baseball, a good catcher controls the game. He calms or fires up the pitcher, and calls for various pitches to be thrown. With a full view of the field, the catcher can move the defense around to better match his view of where the ball might be hit. At barely 15, Gene controlled the game—not just from behind the plate but also with his bat. He led the team in home runs, walks, and, of course, strikeouts. Gene Moore was a boy playing like a man, in a game played by men who act like boys.

The Egyptians’ catcher was a big farm kid, six feet tall with his wide shoulders and a large frame set upon a pair of spindly legs. His hair was shiny, thick, and as black as the coal Sesser workers used to pull from Big Ben #9. When he slipped on his catcher’s mask and squatted behind the plate, Gene looked like an all-star catcher in his mid-to-late twenties. It was not until he peeled off the mask that fans in the stands realized he was but a boy, too young to shave.



On July 21, 1940, Gene was warming up Davy Thompson in the bullpen a few minutes before the start of a game. Davy was a tall, red-headed 23-year-old flame-thrower. He was playing with the Egyptians while recovering from a spring training injury he suffered with the Class C minor league team of the Detroit Tigers in Evansville. Almost fully healed, Davy was looking forward to returning to Evansville the following week.

“Come on Davy . . . your slider’s not sliding! Get your release up over your shoulder or they’re gonna knock you off the mound today,” spat Gene through his mask. The 15-year-old was coaching the pro pitcher with the confidence of a veteran. The odd thing was that Davy, eight years older than Gene, listened and responded with enthusiasm.

After a few more pitches, Davy was ready. He walked out of the bullpen, slipped his jacket over his arm, nodded and smiled to Gene, and headed for the bench.

Gene walked out on the field and stood behind the plate, his mask in hand as he looked out over The Lumberyard. It was barely suitable for a game of baseball at any level. There were more weeds in the field than grass, and the weathered green bleachers were in desperate need of a fresh coat of paint. Despite its ramshackle condition, The Lumberyard was home and all Gene could think of when he slipped his mask over his head was how much he loved to play the game. His thoughts were interrupted by a stranger’s voice coming from behind the chicken-wire backstop.

“You catch one heck of a game, son.” Gene twisted his head to see an older man standing behind the backstop. He was dressed in a long sleeved, starched, and pressed white shirt, accented with a bright blue tie. His tan face, rugged and weathered, was framed by short light brown hair highlighted with a touch of gray on both temples.

Gene flipped up his mask. “Thanks.”

“You hit that ball last night four-hundred feet,” the stranger continued. “I know. I walked it off this morning. That’s one heck of a wallop for a kid!”

“I am not a kid!” Gene snapped.

“How old are you, son?”

"I'll be 16," Gene answered, looking over the field before turning his gaze back to the stranger, adding in a barely audible voice, "next year."

The stranger laughed, "Well, I didn't mean anything by that, other than to compliment you on your skill on the field for such a young man."

"Thank you," replied Gene, who trotted off toward the dugout wondering who the stranger was and why he was sitting behind a chicken-wire backstop in Sesser, Illinois.

Frank Boudreau knew baseball, and he had an eye for talent. A veteran scout for the Brooklyn Dodgers, Frank knew a future Major Leaguer when he saw one, and Gene Moore was exactly that. The kid swung a big bat fast and hard and controlled the game like a field marshal. What really impressed Frank was that older ballplayers listened to this kid about how to play ball. Gene was not just an equal, but a team leader. Frank knew from experience that the only thing that mattered when you stepped onto a baseball field was what you know and what you could do. And Gene seemed to be able to do it all and everyone respected him for it, fans and teammates alike.

"I gotta sign this kid before anyone else sees him," Frank mumbled to himself as he walked back to the bleachers. "Yeah, I gotta sign this kid."

Frank had been around the game for a long, long time. He knocked around the Dodgers' farm system as a mediocre utility infielder, then as a pretty good coach. But his abilities were best employed as a scout. Frank knew and loved baseball, but never had the tools to make it to the big leagues. The Dodgers organization liked his sharp eye for talent. He was a trusted scout, but like every other job in baseball, on or off the field, he had to keep producing. Frank needed a big signing. The last three players he had inked deals with fizzled, so his standing in the organization and his future with the Dodgers depended on his bringing in a big fish.

Frank took a seat in the bleachers near the plate, on the first base side. It was there he began questioning his instincts. His current prospect was a 15-year-old boy? Sure he hit the ball a mile last night, but the shot could have been nothing more than a lucky fast swing at exactly the right place. Did he want to risk his reputation on one long ball? What are the odds a young kid could consistently do that? Frank's anxiety grew as he waited to see how Gene did that day against a quality team. And the Paducah Wildcats were recognized as the league's best. They swept last year's championship series and looked unstoppable again this year.

Frank watched as Gene walked out of the dugout and took his place behind the plate as if he owned it. Davy Thompson ambled up to the mound and took his last few warm-up pitches. Davy threw hard. Frank didn't know how fast Davy's fastball was, but he could hear the ball pop into Gene's mitt. It was a sound every ballplayer loved to hear.

From the first pitch Frank was drawn deeply into the game, mesmerized by what he saw the boy behind the plate do on the field. The game was tight for a few innings. Gene homered in the first, struck out in the third, smacked a double in the fifth, struck out again in the seventh, and hit a long line drive double in the ninth. Through it all Frank saw exactly what he knew to be true: a boy who knew the game of baseball inside and out and could control the game from behind the plate. The Egyptians won 12-2.

As the teams cleared the field, Gene paused to talk with his teammates and dissect the game. Frank made his move, sliding his way between players and fans to reach the knot of elated Egyptians.

"Gene, can I speak with you for a minute?" asked Frank, guiding the catcher over to one side. When they were out of earshot of the rest of the players he made his own pitch. "My name is Frank Boudreau. I'm a scout with the Dodgers."

"Dodgers? Where do they play?" Gene asked.

"Brooklyn, of course! You've never heard of the Brooklyn Dodgers?" Frank's eyebrows arched up in a look of genuine surprise.

Gene stared at Frank for a moment and rubbed his eyebrows in disbelief. "You're a scout for the Brooklyn Dodgers Major League baseball team?"

Frank nodded and reached inside his shirt pocket. "Here's my card, Gene."

The catcher gazed at the crisp white card he suddenly found in his dusty hand. He ran his finger over the raised "Dodger blue" letters as though holding something of great value. He looked up at the scout. Unsure what to say, he said nothing.

"I don't know if you know this, but there is a Gene Moore playing for the Dodgers right now," said Frank.

A small smile broke across Gene's face. "I know. An outfielder. He came up through the Reds organization."

Frank laughed. "You know more about him than I do. But, today, you are the Gene Moore I'm interested in. Let me tell you what I saw. I

saw a young man with tremendous bat speed who hits harder than anyone I know, and certainly harder than anyone I have ever seen at your age. But there are a lot of hard hitters around. But the fact is, you catch one hell of a game and shoot the ball down to second base as fast and as accurately as I have ever seen. Good catchers are common, Gene. Great catchers, now that's something altogether different. They are few and far between." Frank paused for a few seconds to let his words sink in. "Gene, you are a great catcher."

"I love to catch," Gene answered truthfully. "More than anything."

"I know and it shows every time you take the field," Frank continued. "Mechanically, you're excellent, but what makes you so much fun to watch is how you control the game. You're mature beyond your years and you play each game like it's the seventh game of the World Series. I love passionate ballplayers, and, above everything I've seen while watching, you play with heartfelt passion. I think the Dodgers would rather have you in their organization than have you playing for the opposition."

"What do you mean?" Gene asked innocently.

"Gene," Frank continued, "I'd like to meet your parents."

"Why? What do they have to do with the Brooklyn Dodgers?"

"I need to discuss this with your mom and dad. If you'd like to play professional baseball, I'd like to offer you a contract with the Brooklyn Dodgers. But you're only 15, son, and I need to talk this over with your parents."

Gene stared down at his worn catcher's mitt, not believing what he was hearing. He tried to swallow but his mouth was so dry he could barely open it to speak. He looked up one more time at the stranger with the pressed white shirt and sharp business card and managed to stammer out, "You mean Leo Durocher's Brooklyn Dodgers?"

Frank laughed, "Well, Gene, I think my boss, Branch Rickey, the General Manager of the Dodgers, might take issue with you about exactly whose Brooklyn Dodgers they are, but, yes, one and the same." A brief but uncomfortable silence followed before Frank decided to take control of the situation. "Come on, Gene." He put his hand on Gene's shoulder and squeezed it gently. "Let's go meet your Mom and Dad. We can take my car."

As they walked off the field, Frank noticed for the first time the awkwardness of this young boy. Gene was like a Great Dane puppy that

had reached adult size, but didn't know exactly what to do with his long legs and giant paws. Off the field, Gene seemed to be a kid in a grown-up body. It was easy to forget while watching him play that he was really only a small-town boy.

Gene's eyes widened when Frank stopped next to a shiny blue 1938 Buick. The catcher had never seen a fancy car like that before. Frank opened the passenger door and leaned forward, resting his elbows on the top. "Why do you love to catch so much, Gene?"

Gene didn't even hesitate in his answer. "Because I love baseball, and I'm the only guy on the field who can watch the whole game." His voice grew louder and more passionate as the words tumbled from his lips. "Mr. Boudreau, squatting behind the plate, I have the best seat in the house! I hope I can do it forever."

Gene turned to look back at The Lumberyard, as if suddenly mindful that once he climbed into the strangers's car, his life would change forever.

"I love to catch."