

**DON'T LET THE  
GEROSOFERS  
BITE!**

**BOB BASSO**

**Studio City, California: NEW BREED PRESS**

**Copyright © 1990 Bob Basso**

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without prior written permission of the author and publisher.

Published by:

**NEW BREED PRESS**

10664 Bluffside Drive  
Studio City, California 91604  
Phone: (818) 769-9218

Other books by Bob Basso:

Fruit Punch!

Lighten Up Corporate America!

I Never Wanted To Set The World On Fire, Now That I'm  
50, Maybe It's A Good Idea

ISBN #0-9617166-1-4

Library of Congress Catalog Card #90-092009



# Contents

☆	Preface .....	iii
1	The Middle Island Sanitary Closet String Quartet With Death On The Wing .....	1
2	Middle Island Part I: The Magic Starts .....	7
3	Middle Island Part II: Why Did Jackie Robinson Say All Those Things About Uncle Al? .....	19
4	Middle Island Part III: Gerosofers Are No Different Than Any Other Monsters You Meet In Life .....	29
5	Round One: Laughter vs. Cancer .....	37
6	“He’s Very Fond of Hang Gliding on Thursdays After His Bossa Nova Lesson” .....	43
7	The Real Tattooed Lady Wears See-Thru Panties .....	51

8	What Do You Give A Dying Man For Christmas? .....	67
9	Louie and Janet, Two For The Moon .....	73
10	Honesty Point And The Guy Who Bombed Pearl Harbor .....	97
11	“The Pope doesn’t make house calls” .....	113
12	“He’s got the Chinese ear, and you know what that means.” .....	117
13	Can A Gay Father Throw A Perfect Spiral?.....	135
14	The Reverend Blessed Kiss My Face, Bless My Soul and Squeeze My Buns Moves Mountains ... And Then Some.....	145
15	Hellzapoppin! Death Gets A Whale Of An Opening Act .....	159
16	“Don’t wrestle with mysteries. Know what you know and be good to yourself.” .....	171
17	“My father is not going to die with his head in a bucket.” .....	183
18	God Stops the Universe One Last Time: The Bright Red Numbers Seem Ten Feet Tall. Goodbye, Dad.....	193
☆	Epilogue — What Did It All Mean? .....	203

# Dedication

For everyone facing the death of a loved one...

For every caregiver stretched to the limits of endurance...

For every fellow biped who was brought up to think pain and suffering is your punishment for not marrying rich...

**Then...**

And to family, yours and mine. What more do we need?  
*Lighten up and enjoy!*

**A Recent Now...**



# Preface

I earn my living as a laughter therapist. Not by choice, but rather through genetic determination. I come from a long line of hearty laughers who seemed predestined to be drawn away from the dusty wine fields north of Naples, down through the heather specked hills of Edinburgh and Dublin to finally settle in the one corner of the great melting pot where humor in the face of chaos was an epidemic and everybody had the bug ... Brooklyn, New York.

Mom and Dad were not Ozzie and Harriet. There were many chinks in their armor. But throughout all the pain, the shouting, the struggle and the combat, there was always, finally, a laugh. I've come to understand it was a very special gift that kept the demons at arm's length long enough for a less treacherous perspective of the universe to form. If you believe the six o'clock news, it is an elusive antidote divinely needed among today's megastressed nuclear families.

I teach, preach, write, consult and implement programs that “lighten up” living environments and encourage the positive response in factories, board rooms, schools, cancer wards and playing fields throughout our country. Fun, humor and productive play are the backbone of the process we call Light Management.

On October 25, 1986, I began keeping a diary. I knew I was facing the ultimate test of the power of humor and laughter to heal and make meaningful the most confounding of all human acts — the final one — death. My Dad was dying. But this is not a story about death. It’s about reactions along the way and the need to soften and lighten them when everybody else is clinging to a tradition of sanctimonious tragedy. It’s about the search for answers to mysteries we all must face when attending to a dying parent. I found my answer in the simplest of ancient family wisdom. I hope it helps you find yours. If not, then let’s enjoy a few laughs together kicking the Grim Reaper in the tail. He’s not used to it. The surprise may do both him and us a lot of good. This is a true story. Some names have been changed, basically to protect me. There’s still a second grade teacher out to get me.

Bob Basso, May 1988  
Studio City, California

*“Nothing, no experience good or bad, no belief, no cause is in itself momentous enough to monopolize the whole of life to the exclusion of laughter.”*

— Alfred North Whitehead

*“Stop taking yourself so seriously, willya. Remember, when you die, ultimately, the size of your funeral will depend on the weather.”*

— My Mother



1

# The Middle Island Sanitary Closet String Quartet With Death On The Wing

My father was facing death and I was bringing him a fart cassette. To compound the absurdity, I was excited about it because I positively knew it contained more magic than the surgeon's knife and all his accumulated wisdom on the subject of colorectal cancer.

Our 737 dropped smoothly into its approach pattern as the oohs and aahs of first-time visitors announced their initial glimpse of Diamond Head crater jutting out majestically on the southeastern tip of Oahu.

## 2 Don't Let the Gerosofers Bite!

After twenty-four years and hundreds of flights in and out of Hawaii, my oohs and aahs are gone, but the chill remains. It's hard to be blasé over a hunk of real estate many probing minds believe holds the key to creation.

Below us now, Waikiki, staggering under the weight of five-and-a-half-million tourists and all the shameless, glitzy huckstering that comes with the selling of "Paradise." Still, the gluttony of high-rise developers, fast-food moguls and flea market trinketeers plays second trombone to the surrounding beauty that prompted Robert Louis Stevenson to proclaim it, "The loveliest fleet of islands that lie anchored in any ocean."

God, how I love this place and the memories of all the fun I shared way back when the bloom of statehood was as fresh as the smell of white ginger blowing down from the rugged Koolau mountains. First, as a devil-may-care Public Affairs Officer at Pearl Harbor, upsetting the staid Navy bureaucracy by drawing upon my show business background to produce and promote memorable morale boosters that always seemed to feature the biggest-breasted sex symbols in America.

After the service the show moved to local television, where I assumed the role of a free-swinging, controversial sportscaster, twinkling the stuffy pride of the local establishment and relishing their colorful retributions — like dumping a ton-and-a-half of cow manure on my front lawn or painting my house bordello pink in the middle of the night.

That was then. Now I was a visitor earning my way on the mainland as a professional lecturer and a proponent of *Light Management*, teaching the power of the positive response to business and medical professionals all over the

world. Billed as “America’s Number One Fun Motivator,”<sup>1</sup> I moved in and out of conventions and training sessions for Fortune 500 companies, teaching overstressed corporate America to build greater profit by making joy the bottom line for both themselves and their workers. The power of positive thinking has been around since Cro-Magnons started whistling in the dark. All I did was codify it into a step-by-step management process. Since then, I have basked in the reflected glory of many businesses who have caused major turnarounds using the system to put back colorful meaning and welcome profit into their work efforts. I have borne witness to terminally ill patients who refuse to act and think like maudlin losers and either beat death or held it at bay by the power of the positive response. Over a hundred and fifty times a year for the past several years I was thirty-five thousand feet in the air going someplace to tell this association or that company or this medical staff to “Lighten up. Make work productive play and refuse to take any news tragically as your first step to managerial health.”

Now I was faced with my biggest personal test of that philosophy. Was it all a magnificent, profitable fraud? Is positive thinking nothing more than the most acceptable sham we have to forestall the inevitable tragic consequences of modern life? Am I really like all the other self-styled New Age charlatans, gurus and “How to” authors capitalizing on the late twentieth century rage to believe the mind as a healer?

My hero, my role model, a man I both loved and feared as a boy and man, was dying. So, too, was our ironclad father-

---

<sup>1</sup> *People Magazine*, September 19, 1983.

#### 4 Don't Let the Gerosofers Bite!

son bond — that mystical reality that may in the long run determine more of my gender's pain and triumph than all the free will that ever was. How much of who I really am belongs to me, and how much belongs to him? Would I be able to find a positive response to his passing? The one thing I knew for sure was that I would at last be free to discover these answers on my own. The certainty was frightening.

A slight turn makai (seaward) over the reef runway and then a soft bank mauka (toward the mountains) and we were lined up for our landing. In perfect theatrical timing, with the gleaming white marble Arizona Memorial off to the left and Diamond Head to the right, the romantic, twangy strains of "Blue Hawaii" filled the cabin. I've landed in the most exotic spots in the world, but none of them comes close to generating the giggly, smiling promise of joy that a touchdown in Hawaii produces. The magic is real and touches every passenger with meaning. For the two dozen female senior citizens in the black and gold T-shirts with "Scranton Queen Mothers Bowling League" emblazoned on their chests, it's time to yelp, stomp their feet and hug everybody within grabbing distance, including the startled snoozing rabbi in seat 12H. Three little old nuns up front bless themselves and exchange pleasant "Alohas" with their seatmates. Even the nerdy sourpuss beside me, who spent five hours and seven minutes jotting down notes on both his and my barf bags, cracks a smile and whispers, "It's nice to be home. You live here?"

"Not any more. My parents are retired here."

I had responded to all of Mom's and Dad's medical emergencies in the past seventeen years in the same way. With a prop,

a joke, a costume, a skit, a show. Laughter was the only self-prescribed medicine I had grown up with. As I looked at the hand-written title of the healing cassette I was bringing to Dad, I knew we'd be starting our confrontation with all this dying business on unequal terms. We'd be laughing.

The title of the cassette, "The Middle Island Sanitary Closet String Quartet."

As our plane taxied past the long rows of sleek Japanese airliners, I tried to slip the cassette into my recorder for one last quality check. I couldn't do it. Suddenly, my hands were shaking uncontrollably. In an instant, the late afternoon sunlight bouncing off every corner of the cabin was gone. In its place, an ominous pale din hung everywhere. I could feel the cold beads of sweat working their way into my eyebrows. What's going on? Now I heard a familiar voice commanding me to look out the side window. There he was — sitting arrogantly on the tip of our starboard wing, wearing that damnable smug smile of self satisfaction — my life-long enemy, *a Gerosofer!*<sup>1</sup> While I had never seen this one before, there was no mistaking his kinship to that diabolical brotherhood. That twisted grin was a dead giveaway. Like all of his venomous breed, he was amorphous, able to assume any shape, any size, and place. But this one was different. Bigger, darker, radiating more heat and power than I had ever felt. He was looking right at me. Gerosofers have the ability to speak to you from great distances and make their words seem like they were whispered directly into your ears.

His words were spoken in a menacingly slow motion that carried the weight of oppressive authority. It mesmerized me

---

<sup>1</sup> Pronounced **Ja • rós • a • fer**.

## **6 Don't Let the Gerosofers Bite!**

and kept me anchored in my seat until the entire plane had emptied. He repeated the same eerie litany, "I am the greatest power on earth. Nothing you can do can stop my pain and sorrow. Don't fight! I am final."

Was this the ultimate Gerosofer — Death? Would Dad's secret antidote to all of life's assaults, taught to me so many years ago in the wilds of Middle Island, fail me now?

I was the last one on the plane.

The stewardess was gently shaking my right shoulder, "Sir, we've landed in paradise. Time to enjoy. Time to play."

## 2

# Middle Island Part I: The Magic Starts

To fully understand the power of this silly and improbable medicine I'm bringing to battle my Dad's cancer, you've got to travel a dusty road back in time to a blue-collar Camelot we called Middle Island. Every family has one tucked in their collective memory. It is that special combination of place and idea where absurdity and simplicity lived side by side to produce wonder, a bit of magic and lots of sustained laughter.

Every summer Dad would load up his '36 Ford with the one good window and no floors and take the family on our yearly commune with nature — strange sounds in the night, kerosene lamps, cooking on the pot-bellied stove, rustic isolation and red ants in everything you ate. We were off to “rough it” for a few weeks at Uncle Al's shacks-primeval in the woods.

## 8 Don't Let the Gerosofers Bite!

Sisters Bonnie and Judi hated it. It meant the ultimate humiliation for vain little girls — using the dilapidated outhouse with all its uncouth arrangements. Five year old Judi always threatened, “I’m going to hold it in all summer. If I die, it’s your fault, Dad.” For me, it meant another season of fending off the infamous Gerosofers.

Middle Island was neither an island nor was it in the middle of anything. Sixty miles from the heart of New York City on the eastern tip of Long Island, it was the closest thing we had to an untamed wilderness. Little less than two-and-a-half miles square of unpaved, dusty roads generally leading nowhere, but occasionally to a few framed houses. It was sparsely but richly populated by an unusual network of colorful characters, who seemed to have walked right out of the Sunday comics and into our lives.

There was John P., the Kris Kringle-like proprietor of the only country store within miles. Aside from tripling as the postmaster, police and fire chief, always-smiling John was an expert on every subject in the explored universe. Behind his large oak countertop next to the ten pound sacks of corn seed and miller’s flour were dusty shelves crumbling under the weight of the most extensive collection of reference books this side of the Library of Congress. And John had read and reread them all. From the time you walked up the two wooden front steps and opened the door with the cow bell hanging on the inside, John was already spewing forth an amazing stream of the most disjointed information, obscure facts, quotations and philosophical musings imaginable.

The man never, never stopped talking.

“Good morning. Expectin’ a little rain later on. Don’t you think Henry Adams’ observation that the succession of

American presidents from Washington to Grant was enough in itself to dispose Darwin's theory of evolution? I 'spect so. Now, what's that you want ... half pound of salted butter and a dozen bagels? Comin' right up. I jest don't know what it is, but I feel so antsy today. Have you noticed? Why, I feel like those sacrificial Aztec maidens who climbed the pyramid steps in order to present their hearts to the gods and their bodies to the hungry eaters below. That'll be a dollar ten. Have a nice breakfast."

By the time you hit the front door you were likely to hear his personal theory on the meaning of Stonehenge or, perhaps, whole passages from the book of Tao in the original Chinese. Had I been a better listener, I'm sure I could have skipped primary and secondary school and matriculated after a half dozen visits to John P's Country Store University.

There was eighty year old Polish Tony, the tomato impresario. He lived in the woods all his life, but nobody except Uncle Al knew anything about him. You see, old Tony spoke a weird gibberish that came out sounding like a burlesque double-talk routine and, somehow, Uncle Al was the only one who understood it. Theirs was a strained relationship at best, built on mutual distrust and man's basic need to be understood by at least one other human being. They never talked — they shouted at one another. It stemmed from Tony's belief that Al had robbed him of his greatest possession, a gold watch given to him by a Polish prince shortly before he was placed against the wall and shot by revolutionaries. Al claimed, "The stupid old bastard got pie-eyed drunk one night, made a speech about the damn aristocrats raping his country and threw the goddamn watch down the hole in his shithouse. Then he burned it down." True, there was a

## 10 Don't Let the Gerosofers Bite!

charred mound of rubble in Tony's outback. And true, he always walked down the road to relieve himself at a neighbor's privy. But nobody knew for sure what ever happened to his gold timepiece.

What everybody did know was that Polish Tony had accomplished what mad agrarian scientists and Italian grandfathers only dream about — he possessed the secret to producing crops of tomatoes the size of cantaloupes — each perfectly round, each blood red and juicy-fruity delicious. So tempting was the sight of his awesome crop shining in the summer sun that many roadside admirers couldn't resist plucking one or two dozen to carry back to unbelieving friends to prove they knew a real wizard.

So bad was the pilfering that poor Tony had to resort to frontier justice to end the crime spree. Sitting in the fields, shotgun at the ready, he would stand guard for hours at a time, scanning his heavenly gifts for would-be veggie poachers. It made no sense at all. Tony was blind in his shooting eye, and whatever vision he had left was kept in a perpetual alcohol haze from the dozen or so quart bottles of Shaefer premium brew beer he consumed every day. It didn't stop his greater thirst for fair play. He'd shoot at anything that cast a suspicious shadow. Consequently, everything left standing on his rundown little farm was riddled with thirty-aught-six shotgun holes. In one day, July 22nd, which happened to coincide with Poland's National Liberation Day, he destroyed a tractor, chicken coop, every window in his '32 Chevy truck, his neighbor's outdoor plumbing and ended the assault by shooting off his left thumb. A hastily formed SWAT team finally stormed his encampment and disarmed him. Ever independent, Tony announced to Al he was now going to buy

dynamite sticks and mine the tomato patch. They gave him back his shotgun.

On his deathbed, with a basket of fresh tomatoes at his side, Tony gave the world of herbaceous plant science what it desperately wanted to know — his big secret. I doubt the new knowledge was ever acted upon. He looked up at Al, cursed him again for stealing his watch, pointed to his beloved tomatoes, mumbled some of his wonderful gibberish, and died.

“What did he say, Uncle Al?” Seeing my first living thing die was second to finding out the big secret.

Uncle Al blew a big white smoke cloud from his Panatela, picked up the basket and inspected each beauty carefully.

“He said the reason his tomatoes were so big was the special fertilizer he used.” He paused to smell one of them, “Chickenshit ... from happy chickens. But he said nobody should try it because he was the only one who could tell if a chicken was happy or not. Dumb Polack bastard.” Perhaps, but the world as I know it has never again seen such voluptuous, oversized veggies.

Down the road from Tony in the orange house without windows lived “Buttocks La Tour,” or so she was dubbed by the local gentry. A middle-aged lady of astounding proportions, fore and aft, she spoke to no one and came out at unscheduled times to perform a pleasing albeit puzzling ritual that gave me my first animated introduction to the female anatomy. Prior to this, I was confined to the underwear ads in *Colliers* magazine, supplemented by Uncle Al’s catalogue of Dr. Herman Wackenhut’s Medical Prostheses And Other Aids To Living.

## 12 Don't Let the Gerosofers Bite!

She'd open the door, look around very demurely, then make a mad dash down the country road ... jaybird naked. She'd maintain a fast gallop until the spirit moved her, and then she'd disappear into the woods. Was she some surviving sylvan nymph recreating a pagan rite of summer? Or was she just another one of those wonderful zanies in this misnamed patch of unpolished enchantment?

Above all of them was Mom's Uncle Al, the founder and acknowledged leader of the pack in Middle Island. Five feet nine, two hundred and seventy-five pounds and always chompin' on a nickel cigar, Alexander John Fackner was a dead ringer for Wallace Beery, with most of the star's lovable gruffness. A benevolent leader, he had a decided laissez-faire attitude toward his flock. Hell, he just didn't give a damn what happened outside his own three-quarter acre shanty town he affectionately referred to as "The Estate." His world began at the broken birchwood fence at the entrance with the five foot high rusted tin cartoon poster of an oversized policeman drinking a Nehi soda. It ended a few hundred feet up the sloping tract past the three shacks (Shangri-la #s 1, 2 and 3) at the sacred Indian burial grounds, a few feet away from the not-sacred-at-all two-holer privy. With my official Red Ryder Daisy BB gun, official Boy Scouts of America red-handled knife and hatchet, I would forage forth in the outback, past the sacred resting place, looking for old arrowheads and pottery pieces from the indigenous people. All I ever found were beer bottle caps and surprisingly well-preserved condoms. It was obvious that the tribe had adopted the palefaces' modern approach to arts and crafts.

But the man with post office box number one in Middle Island was probably held in high regard more for his six-

months-a-year job than his colonizing ability. Uncle Al was the clubhouse security guard for the legendary Brooklyn Dodgers baseball team at Ebbets Field. Every day he actually joked and exchanged confidences with the gods of baseball when Brooklyn was the center of the universe.

In 1919, when the rest of the country was getting ready to welcome the colorful insanity of the Roaring Twenties, Al drove his Model T as far into the country as he could. After all, city life was only an economic necessity for this essential loner. He was built for rustic indifference. Besides, the night before he was to get married, he dropped by to deliver a bouquet of flowers to his beloved Carrie and found her in bed with his best friend. He had two choices. One would put him in the state pen for life, the other was to follow the advice of his favorite author, Thoreau, and forget the evils of city living in the arms of nature. He calmly chose the poetic option and never again sought the companionship of women.

He made friends with an outcast family of Indians, who turned out to have none of the wilderness skills of their hearty ancestors. They danced around a bald spot of earth and told Al this was the exact geometric center of Long Island. Too much firewater had clouded their sense of direction. They were forty miles off. Al believed them and called the new land "Middle Island." They next gathered scrap lumber from an abandoned reservation site. Al, ever the man of leisure, was content to sit back and sample the chief's tobacco, while the Keystone Cops of the Iroquois nation built three Rube Goldberg contraptions entirely out of ... odd-sized doors! The walls were doors. The floors were doors. Even the outhouse was all doors.

## 14 Don't Let the Gerosofers Bite!

For variety the inept native brothers of the wind did use another material, which remained cleverly concealed for twenty years until Dad happened upon the scene. In appreciation for Al's hospitality, Dad would always do odd jobs around the place — building a fence here, reinforcing a porch there. The summer of '47 was memorable for two reasons: Jackie Robinson became the first black man in major league baseball and Dad decided to tar all of Al's roofs.

We bought the tar and equipment at John P's and, at the same time, heard him sing an eerie selection of little-known hymns of the Bhagavad Gita. Dad forgot to buy gloves, but drove seven miles to another store rather than go back and hear a lecture on the positive sciences of the ancient Hindus.

Back at "The Estate," we hung the battery-operated radio on the tree, tuned in the Dodgers-Cardinals game and got set for the big facelift. Dad instructed me in the fine art of raising and steadying a ladder. Safety was nine-tenths of a successful life to Louie Basso, New York City fireman first grade. He then made his way up to tar the roof. Tar bucket in one hand, a roll of heavy tar paper flung over the other shoulder, he paused midway. Jackie Robinson had singled to left and, in what was to become his immortal trademark, was dancing off first getting ready to pull off a robbery. It was the most exciting moment in the life of Brooklyn fans everywhere — number 42 kicking the dirt around first base, taunting the opposing pitcher and maybe the world to put out his fire. All non-essential activity in New York came to a standstill when Jackie was on base. All eyes and ears turned to the table model Philcos in the stores and factories, the domineering Stromberg-Carlsons in the living rooms or the compact Emersons in the dashboards. Traffic on the freeways slowed,

the economy froze, the sick forgot their pain, old men and women miraculously became young again. Life's insignificancies were put on hold because one marvelously proud and talented pigeon-toed black man was shouting the loudest silent scream of protest in the land. For one grand moment we were all one people, united in a simple childlike anticipation. "Come on, Jackie, you can do it! We know how wrong we've been with our racial prejudice. Redeem us all. Give all the little guys in this long-suffering land of the underdog, Brooklyn, USA, something to be proud of. Stick it to 'em. Do what we can only dream of, Jackie. Strike a blow for freedom. Steal a win for da' Bums. Come oooonnnnn, Jackie!"

"Whatdaya think, Dad? Is he going to do it?"

"He's going to steal second and keep on going."

"Howdoya know?"

"The man has something the rest of them don't have — a strong commitment. It'll make him even better than he is. Just wait and see."

The usually calm, modulated drawl of announcer Red Barber always jumped into schoolboy excitement when Jackie was on base. "Robinson is kicking up a beeeeg fuss at first. Look at that lead. How can they let him do that ... uh oh, there he goes in a cloud of dirt, hooksliding under Red Schoendienst's tag. Where's the ball?! Red dropped the ball and, doya believe it ... Jackie is on his way to third. The throw beats him. Robinson goes head first. Lang tags him. *Safe!*"

## 16 Don't Let the Gerosofers Bite!

You could hear Tomato Tony screaming a half mile down the road. Dad smiled, climbed onto the roof and disappeared from sight as he moved to the center.

Suddenly — a crashing sound followed by a heavy thud. Chubby little sister Judi, munching a Lorna Doone cracker, came out from the house and nonchalantly announced, “Daddy fell through the roof. No blood.” Out he walked from the living room, covered in gooey, shiny black tar.

“What happened, Dad?”

“Those goddamn retarded Indians made the roof out of *glass!*” And so they had. He spent the rest of his vacation removing hundreds of slabs of painted glass and building a substantial opaque roof for the house of doors.

Jackie stole 29 bases that year, batted .297, won Rookie of the Year and led the Dodgers to the National League Pen-  
nant and a rendezvous with the Yanks in the World Series.

When the Dodgers were on the road, Uncle Al would pack the rumble seat of his “new” ’28 Chevy with Social Tea crackers, contraband toilet paper, autographed balls and bats (for resale) and a copious supply of his magic cure-all — Haywood’s Rectal Ointment — and join us at “The Estate.”

Haywood’s had been a popular frontier remedy, soothing the saddle hurts of such famous posteriors as those of Wild Bill Hickok, Doc Holliday, Teddy Roosevelt and a few generations of every cowpoke who ever slapped leather on the range. Men and women of true grit may have won the West, but Haywood’s allowed them to sit down and enjoy the victory. It had long since gone the way of the buffalo.

But Al knew a guy, who knew another guy, who knew where there was a warehouse full of the stuff. So for the

bartered price of a Pee Wee Reese autograph and a personal introduction to Leo Durocher, Uncle Al was able to corner the non-existent market on the most unlikely panacea unknown to science. Under his stewardship, it was never used for its advertised purpose but worked verifiable miracles on every part of the body. It cured Judi's frequent wasp bites, Tomato Tony's impacted tooth (Al bartered a half tube for a year's supply of tomatoes and Tony's promise to shut up about the watch business), John P's mysterious stomach rash and on every unsolved ache and pain suffered by every National League ballplayer who ever played in Ebbets Field between 1935 and 1955.

When he arrived, Uncle Al immediately indulged his overriding passion in life — patching, anything and everything. He was a charter member of a dying breed that lived by the simple code, “Old is better. Don't throw it away. Patch it!” Everything at “The Estate” was scheduled to die in 1898. The hand water pumps, the tribal boiling pots, Civil War day beds, Victorian chamber pots, hand-cranked disc record player and the Lewis and Clark utensils we used to eat with. They were all rescued from the grave by Al's uncanny ability to patch any existing inanimate object. As far as I can determine, he is the only white man who ever patched a tomahawk. He used it for thirty-six years as a hammer. Told me, “The first of anything is always better. Hold onto it. Remember that, Bobby.” I never did get the knack of driving a nail into a two-by-four with a tomahawk.

After my Great Uncle Al died, I went through his very neat dresser drawers and inventoried his likewise very neatly-stacked rows of clothing and other items. I counted six T-shirts, seven extra large baggy boxer shorts, four pairs of

## **18 Don't Let the Gerosofers Bite!**

white socks, two pairs of watchman's suspenders, eight white handkerchiefs (four with other people's initials), one wide black tie, a faded picture of a pretty Gibson Girl with the inscription, "My Carrie," and an autographed picture of a black baseball player with his arm around Al smiling broadly. It was signed, "To Al, a man of uncommon wisdom who booted my butt when I needed it most. Always, Jackie Robinson." Every item had one thing in common. They were all patched.

### 3

## **Middle Island Part II: Why Did Jackie Robinson Say All Those Things About Uncle Al?**

The story behind the Jackie Robinson inscription probably best illuminates the character beneath the character of the most talked about fruit on our family tree, and the man who first discovered Gerosofers.

Fate, and great minor league stats, picked out twenty-eight-year-old Jackie Roosevelt Robinson to shoulder the monumental burden of holding up to high ridicule and

## 20 Don't Let the Gerosofers Bite!

exposing the inhumane illusion that only white men could properly hit, field and run in major league baseball. After an outstanding year at the Dodgers' Montreal farm team, he was brought up and pushed out into the biggest and loneliest spotlight in sports history. General Manager Branch Rickey, the mastermind behind the big social breakthrough, took the proud, powerfully-built, soft-spoken athlete aside and asked him to be superhuman. "You're going to have to take a lot of abuse. And you're going to have to bite your upper lip and take it in silence. Because all the bigots are going to pull out all the stops to destroy your concentration. They'll all be looking for you to slip up and give them an excuse to ruin your career. Like it or not, you're a barometer. How well you behave will determine the fate of other black players moving into the big leagues."

As it turned out, Rickey was greatly underestimating the enemy. As a kid, I remember standing next to my Uncle Al outside the clubhouse under the right field stands as the players dressed and moved out to the field down the long underground tunnel. They walked in plain view of hundreds of ogling fans leaning over the railing of the concrete ramp high above.

All the players were pretty loose, laughing and kibbitzing with one another. All except Jackie. Usually alone, but sometimes joined by Pee Wee, he walked in a quick, purposeful gait, eyes ahead, serious, intense. Why not? He drew the eyes of the world with every step. While the vast majority of the Brooklyn faithful were willing to let Jackie prove his worth on the field, there was an ugly vocal minority who never let up.

"Hey, here comes Rickey's nigger."

“Shine. Over here, boy. Shine.”

They spit, threw bottles and vilely impugned his mother’s good name. On the field, the small minds took advantage of every contact possibility to spike, kick and verbally harass him whenever they could sneak it in. Sneaking insults at Jackie Robinson before a national audience became a clever deception for the shameless. Through it all, number 42 kept silent, not so much as firing back with a dirty look. How much longer could he defend himself with just his superior batting and fielding statistics? Everybody wondered.

Late in the summer of ’47, the pigs threatened to take over the farm. A large group of boozing redneck rabble-rousers stormed the guard gate. Although their true motivation was never clearly determined, their anti-racial slurs were loud and obviously aimed at Jackie. I was there. Uncle Al quietly took out his blackjack and hid it deep inside his huge right hand. Next, he took a firm grip of his policeman’s nightstick and told me to get behind the cement stanchion. Two invaders jumped on his back while a third punched him squarely in the face. He never flinched. This was all-familiar territory. His sixty years and walrus-like proportions were very deceptive. Incredibly strong and agile, he was a forty-year battle-hardened veteran of security work in the toughest neighborhoods in the world. He had traded blows and bullets with notorious gangsters, bootleggers, hitmen and just plain mean dudes from Hell’s Kitchen on Manhattan’s west side, to the infamous Redhook section of Brooklyn where a bullet wound was a minimum requirement for residence. A bunch of amateur vigilantes was a piece of crumb cake.

Crouching low behind the cement structure, I said three rapid-fire Hail Mary’s that my favorite grand-uncle would

## 22 Don't Let the Gerosofers Bite!

not be devoured by the forces of evil. Sister Mary George, my third grade teacher, always told us God answers all prayers. Up until now, he always said 'No' to mine, so I decided to pull an end run and try the Blessed Virgin. What a smart move. No sooner did I get the last 'Amen' out than Uncle Al swung into action. Out came the blackjack. Wop, wop. Just that quickly he scored direct hits on the monkeys crawling on his back ... without even looking. Had to be divine intervention. One fell unconscious, while the other screamed hysterically at the sight of his own blood. The hero who punched Al in the face, while his cohorts held his arms, was next. He threw another punch, which Al stopped in mid-flight with his nightstick. The redwood crushed every bone in its path. Next, in a feat of strength I have never seen duplicated even in the most improbable Kung Fu movies, Uncle Al picked up the over six-foot assailant by his neck, the accepted way you might lift a cat, and draped him over the railing about four feet off the floor.

It wasn't over.

The stupidest man in the world picked up a chair and cracked it across my uncle's broad back. That hurt. He let out a whine, but quickly composed himself. Now he was angry. Enough sparring. This worm needed a lesson. The worm had a knife. Al knew every street combat trick in the book. In one motion, he took off his stiff-brimmed uniform cap and flung it like a deadly boomerang. In hit Mister Stupid smack in the kisser and drew blood. It wouldn't be the last. Al swatted the knife away with his club and calmly announced, "No weapons allowed in Ebbets Field. That's a violation, pal." Then he delivered a devastating King Kong chop to the right side of the face that sent a jawbone piercing through the skin,

splattering more blood. The punk fell like a baggie full of wet oatmeal, motionless. Al never looked back at the rest of the rabble lined outside the gate. Somehow he knew they knew the assault on Fort Apache was over.

He picked up his blackjack, walked over to the equipment manager's office, lit up a White Owl and called the police.

He took a long, satisfying puff, put some Haywood's on his swollen right fist, looked down at me and whispered, "Don't tell your mother." Why was it that every time a male in our family rose to the heights of Homeric legend in my eyes did they turn to me and say the same thing, "Don't tell your mother!" I think that's why I'm writing this book, so I can finally tell my mother!

Well, Mom, now that I'm on a roll ... here's the true story behind Jackie's inscription to Uncle Al.

On August 24, 1948, in Pittsburgh, the most controversial baseball player in the world got tired of biting his lip. He didn't like the way plate umpire Butch Henline was calling the game, and he let him know it in very colorful remarks. Jackie Robinson got thrown out of his first game. Two weeks later, a record crowd of 35,750 at Ebbets Field saw the home club in the bottom of the tenth in a 1-1 tie with their arch-nemesis, the New York Giants. Brooklyn had captured the hearts of fans everywhere staging a dramatic run for the pennant, moving from last place to first in the final weeks of the season. Now they were slumping. They lost four straight and had fallen two back of the Boston Braves. They needed this one badly. Jackie came to the plate, walking in front of the catcher as he always did and waiting until the catcher went down on his haunches before stepping into the batter's box. Monte Kennedy, locked in a brilliant pitching duel with

## 24 Don't Let the Gerosofers Bite!

Preacher Roe, cautiously ran the count to 2 and 2. The next one was inside and brushed Jackie back. Umpire Larry Goetz called a third strike and the joint went wild. So did Jackie. The year-and-a-half of enforced silence was over. The real Jackie Robinson was emerging — strong, assertive, unwilling to let any real or perceived wrong go unchallenged. The gloves were off. He dropped his bat in an open gesture of defiance, turned suddenly on the ump and started advancing, a steady stream of invectives punctuating his angry rhythms. Coach Clyde Sukeforth rushed out to try and get Jackie away. This only enraged Jackie, who broke away and headed for Goetz again, who quickly and dramatically waved him out of the game.

Jackie came storming through the underground tunnel leading to the clubhouse, kicking at the dirt, shouting obscenities, pausing only to pound the concrete walls with his fists. He brushed past Al at the entrance to the empty locker room and flung his fielder's mitt the length of the room. Next, a half dozen lockers bearing the names Furillo, Branca, Duke, Campy, Rex and the Pistol felt the wrath of sixty years of racial intolerance as the former UCLA All American halfback bulldozed his way around the room. Al stood at the entrance, watching quietly. Jackie stopped in the middle of the room and shouted defiantly, "That's it. No more. I'm through. I don't have to take this bleeping bleep any more!" He hurriedly dressed without taking a shower and headed toward Al at the entrance. The familiar nasal broadcast voice of Red Barber was resounding through the bowels of the stadium. "Top of the eleventh and the Preacher man has his work cut out for him. He'll be facing the meat of the Giant order. Can he put them away just one more time?"

Al blocked his exit.

“Whatdahell are you doing, Al? Get out of my way. I’m through with all this crap.”

“Well, maybe you are, Jackie, but you’re not leaving this way.”

Robinson was under a full head of supercharged steam and was not beyond lowering a powerful shoulder that had taken on the toughest linebackers in college football and bowling his way to freedom. It would have have been a memorable collision. Instead, Jackie looked Al right in the eye, took a menacing beat, lowered his voice and said, “Say what you got to say and then get the hell out of my way.”

Al removed the cigar from his mouth.

“If you’re gonna quit baseball, you’re gonna have to leave by the right field exit. You’re gonna have to walk past all those black shoeshine kids on Bedford Avenue listening to one radio waiting for their hero, Jackie Robinson, to get a hit. If you can look them in the eye, Jack, and feel good about quittin’, then keep on goin’. But you’re not leavin’ past me.”

Jackie made a quick decision not to further vent his substantial rage on a simple, friendly man who had always treated him with the same unassuming smile he offered all the players. After all, wasn’t Al, the Special Cop at the gate, one of the first people inside Ebbets Field to shake his hand and welcome him to the big leagues? And with all the doubt and suspicion he got from his teammates, didn’t he always know exactly where he stood when he talked to Al Fackner? I’m sure all these things registered when he decided to turn and leave by the right field exit.

## 26 Don't Let the Gerosofers Bite!

Al sat down and focused on Red Barber. A big moan rocked the old stadium. Johnny Mize had just socked his second home run. The Giants had the boys on the ropes 3-1 in the bottom of the twelfth, two out and Brooklyn's last hope, an untried rookie from Mobile, George Shuba, was at the plate with the bases loaded. Half the crowd was heading for the exits.

The clubhouse door opened and a very different Jackie Robinson re-entered. Quiet, pensive and in low gear, he walked to his locker and sat down. He stared straight ahead for a few moments before he slowly raised his head and looked at Al. One of the greatest talents and brightest minds in sports legend, and the old, overweight common man in the patched white shirt who never finished the second grade. Nothing was said. Not then. Not ever. Just that special look men use when each recognizes that silent bond of genuine understanding. Again the stadium was rocked with emotion. It spilled into the streets and throughout the entire city. Young Shuba cleared the bases with a blast high off the right center field screen. Da' Bums were on the way back. Dodgers 4, Giants 3. Jackie Robinson went on to play nine record-setting seasons and was by far the most magnificent of those magnificent boys of summer.

In early 1957, Dodger President Walter O'Malley moved quickly to quell rumors he would move the club out of Brooklyn. He said, "It would be a crime against a community of three million people to move the Dodgers." At the end of the season he outranked Benedict Arnold as the city's most infamous turncoat. He moved the Dodgers to the West Coast. The heart and spirit of a great borough died. For we lost more than a ball club. We lost the promise of summer — that

wonderful thread of hope that rallies and binds us all together and makes us believe we can be better than the sum parts of our gray lives of pedestrian routine. We had invested all we had into a dream that nine average guys like us, blessed with above-average talent, would finally make us all winners. Damn you, O'Malley! Couldn't you see that no one had the right to take all that away? We loved 'dose Bums' because 'dey was us. On September 24, 1957, organist Gladys Gooding played "Auld Lang Syne." Thirty-three thousand fans stood up, held hands and wept openly. It was the last game the Dodgers would ever play in Brooklyn.

Uncle Al was out of a job. Sure, they offered to take him to Los Angeles, but that meant giving up "The Estate." Would Washington give up Mount Vernon? Jefferson his Monticello? Scarlett her Tara? No way. He retired to Middle Island and died seven months later. The death certificate said "complications." We knew differently. It was from that same broken heart that crushed a generation of the most colorfully loyal fans baseball ever had.

Mom called Jackie, who was now a Vice President of the Chock Full 'O Nuts restaurant chain, and informed him of Al's passing. He was testifying before a Congressional committee in Washington, D.C., on racial intolerance in America. He couldn't break away. He sent a large wreath of roses with a card, "I'll never forget you, Al." I don't think he ever did.