




SWEET THUNDER

THE LIFE AND TIMES OF
SUGAR RAY ROBINSON

WIL HAYGOOD


A K N O P F  B O O K



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*In Black and White:
The Life of Sammy Davis, Jr.*

Two on the River (photographs by Stan Grossfeld)

*King of the Cats: The Life and Times of
Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.*

*The Haygoods of Columbus:
A Family Memoir*



Watertown, NY, 1937: Sixteen-year-old Walker Smith Jr. so dazzled the audience that Jack Case, the legendary local sports editor (holding cigar) became an instant admirer. Case saw to it that Smith left town with a new name: Sugar Ray Robinson.

sweet thunder

the
life
and
times
of

Sugar Ray Robinson

**Wil
Haygood**



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All his life the great prizefighter would stare with deep wonder and searching upon this constantly moving cavalcade. It was that world outside the ring that snared Sugar Ray Robinson, the world where beauty and grace held a potent sway. He leaned into Lena's voice and studied Langston's poems. He tried explaining to Miles that their respective artistries had much in common, believing that the trumpet and fighting gloves shared similar mysteries.

As the American calendar kept rolling over the emotional headlines of the forties and the dangerously quiet fifties, a part of the world was spinning in a singular rhythm all its own. From private home to nightclub, from lodge to auditorium, there was a gathering of caramelized and brown and black faces. Sepia dreams—lovely, spilling forth at night—were everywhere, thousands captured in their net. These dreams could not escape segregation, or the laws of the land. But still, art poured from their conditional existence like music lyrics written on a windowpane.

That would be Billy Eckstine ("the sepia Sinatra," they called him) sitting in the chair at Sugar Ray's hair salon. The salon sat next to the prizefighter's Harlem nightspot, called *Sugar Ray's*. His name glowed in red neon cursive lettering atop the awning. The long mahogany bar hosted the famous—starlets, comics, jazzmen, politicians, crooners. The gangsters behaved themselves. And Sugar Ray loved every minute of it. Tapping his feet, fingering his money clip. Why, he loved this world so much there were times he wondered if it just might overtake his primary line of work. Which was delivering pain and causing blood to flow.

HE IS SUCH A NOCTURNAL FIGURE. Rarely does he rush about—moving, instead, as if in some kind of ether. Even on those days when thousands upon thousands leave their Manhattan homes for Madison Square Garden to see him under the klieg lights or for Yankee Stadium to watch him beneath moonlight, the great Sugar Ray Robinson stirs gently. His work evenings begin around nine o'clock. By midnight he is finished with his work inside the ring, though sometimes, of course, it ends much sooner—a first- or second-round knockout. In Boston in 1950, at the end of the fifth round in a fight with Joe Rindone, Robinson turned to Nat Hentoff, a young reporter at ringside, and mentioned that he hoped the TV audience was enjoying the fight.

“This fight isn’t on TV,” Hentoff told Robinson.

“What?” Robinson snapped, disappointed.

“And so,” recalls Hentoff, “he went and knocked the guy out the next round.”

Time to stir.

Huge crowds gather to see him after the fights—after yet another great battle with Jake LaMotta, Carmen Basilio, Gene Fullmer. But he is known for lingering in the dressing room. He travels with a personal valet. Appearance is everything to him: His suits are hand-stitched on Broadway by tailor Sy Martin. (Sy does tailoring for Duke Ellington and a lot of Hollywood stars.) Finally, there he is, and the members of the crowd reach out to him—newsmen, autograph seekers, gangsters. Only after he has satisfied them is he free to take to the night, authoring a style—cosmopolitan, jazz-touched, elegant—unique to the midcentury fight game. In France they respect his power, but truly love his style.

Scores of admirers—many of them habitués of Broadway and Manhattan literary salons—will trek to his rural training camp at Greenwood Lake, New York. He often runs alone on mountains in the distance, a solitary figure sweeping across land once trod by the Iroquois. He looks good in the morning light. Vermeer would have loved him. His nightclub was on 124th Street in Manhattan. That boozy and golden Hollywood couple, Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton, would sit for hours sipping champagne, devouring heaps of collard greens. (In 1968 Burton starred in a movie, *Candy*, a sexual satire noted for nothing in cinematic history save its eccentric cast: Burton, Marlon Brando, Walter Matthau, James Coburn, and a cameo by Robinson. Burton cast Robinson because he respected legends; Robinson did it for the money.)

Those who have watched him in the ring get as much pleasure, it seems, watching him outside of it—alighting from his flamingo-colored Cadillac down at the Manhattan pier, embarking for Europe on the *Liberté* ocean liner, smiling from the pages of *Life* magazine in

white tie and tails. Because it is America, and he is a black man, and it is a time of fierce segregation and racial polarization, there are always two drama-laden ghosts—Jack Johnson and Joe Louis—looming up at him. The public acclaim for heavyweight champion Jack Johnson and Joe Louis had often been seen through the splintering and consuming twentieth-century prism of race, but it was not so with Robinson. He declined that war and enlisted in cultural enlightenment, laying claim to a different piece of cultural terrain. He sought to force a new sensibility in the way we view athletic accomplishment and society. He was the first black athlete to largely own his own fighting rights, and the first to challenge radio and TV station owners about financial receipts. Unlike Johnson and Louis, he negotiated his own independence, constantly battering back the belief that the athlete—especially the Negro athlete—was an uninformed machine. He simply wished the world to see him as larger than the contours of the ring. So while the champagne slid down his throat, he measured the barriers he'd slip through and plotted his entrée into high society.

He believed business acumen would make him whole. But there was something else—style. His name pops up on best-dressed lists; he is a pal to jazzmen—Dizzy Gillespie, Count Basie, Nat King Cole, Billy Eckstine among them. In the autumn of 1952, he will abandon boxing and turn to the world of entertainment. He will headline his own stage show, traveling with the likes of Count Basie and Cootie Williams; Cootie is an old Ellington standby. Sugar Ray plays piano and drums, and practices his tap dancing until drenched in perspiration. Style is as much a mystery as the cosmos.

Sugar Ray Robinson was the first modern prizefighter to take culture—music and grace and dance—into the ring with him. He had convinced himself that style was as much a discipline as boxing. That he dominated both, for so long, causes the world to marvel. Before the headlines of Selma and Montgomery and Little Rock—he followed the Little Rock crisis that day in 1957, full of pain at reports of the little Negro children being verbally assaulted and pelted with rocks; he'd suffer a rare loss that very night—before all the marches, before it seemed as if a new America had just dropped from the sky right onto the old one's front porch, there was another America and it swirled in its own lovely mist. And a good amount of that swirling could be seen in the long glass mirror of Sugar Ray Robinson's nightclub. A jazz-age architect designed the place. Its red neon lettering on the front allowed the name of the club—*Sugar Ray's*—to fall, at night, right onto the hoods of the long automobiles. It was hard to imagine the proprietor did not plan it that way.

But stare into that mirror and there they are too—songstress Lena Horne, poet Langston Hughes, and trumpeter Miles Davis—habitués of the place. They were becoming seminal figures in their own right, and they swayed as a kind of cultural chorus of the 1940s and 1950s alongside Robinson. Their lives intersected; but more than that, they were Robinson's allies, themselves in the vanguard of a certain kind of style. The singer, trumpeter, and poet were not unlike cultural attachés, swooning their music and prose out into the world with elegant defiance, commiserating or celebrating at one of Robinson's dining tables inside his club. They all wished to push back the curtain onto mainstream America. Robinson long feared being trapped in the ring, being webbed in the American imagination merely as an athlete. He would tell acquaintances, at the height of his worldwide fistfight accomplishments, that the sport actually bored him, that there were other venues to challenge his creative prowess. He marched and listened as a Renaissance man might. Ar

enveloped and seduced him. So, as we follow him in and out of the ring, in and out of his midnight sonatas, across America, to and from Europe, we will intermittently follow the poet, trumpeter, and songstress, watching the spells they weave, the battles they fight against the backdrop of Sugar Ray Robinson's times.

For so many years he has stood as the golden figurine of boxing. Newspapermen and promoters were bewildered by him, believing him uppity and arrogant. He simply would not bend or yield his stature. After leaving the ring, he refused to do boxing commentary, leaving many to wonder if he thought the sport foolish—or sacred. But his image glowed in the fantastical ruminations of children, and they scampered after him, truly feeling his generosity. His link to them was deep. Because this saga begins like that of so many who fight for food and glory—in the eyes of a desperate and hungry child.

Sitting in their church pews gave them time to ponder. They knew that one of the greatest battles they'd have to wage—plotting a way to beat the devil who worked hard to capture the attentions of many in their flock—was upon them. The streets of Manhattan and Harlem were shadowy and menacing; the Depression of the 1930s was unforgiving and could cause young minds to totter in misdirection. The city's tabloids, playing up the morbid crime sagas, told the price of inattention to juvenile vices.

So the ministers and deacons of Salem Methodist Episcopal Church—with the important support of their wives—listened up when they heard of an unusual manner in which to fight back. This mix of Bibles and boxing made sense to them: It required energy to fight sin. They agreed to the creation of the Salem Crescent Athletic Club—a boxing team.

When young Walker Smith Jr., with his long arms and sweet smile, joined the crusade, he proceeded to deliver the church's name and image into a different realm of appreciation. They found themselves saluted, admired, and envied for reasons other than the strictly biblical. Old has-been fighters slipped into the basement to watch the boy, their heads rolling like hurt plums. The boy was special and the ministers knew it. Told from the pulpit of his near-mythical exploits, which had been achieved in small towns up and down the Eastern seaboard, the congregation would utter the same word over and over: Amen. And then they would drop coins and small bills into a basket, so that the Walker Smith-led club might continue its crusade.

say goodbye to Walker Smith Jr

THE CITY OF DETROIT was founded by French slaveholders. They suffered a political rebuke in 1837 when the Michigan legislature opted to join the United States. State officeholders then rose up and outlawed the so-called peculiar institution of slavery.

In the coming years, escaped slaves would rush into the city. Many were delivered by daring operatives of the Underground Railroad. Northern-based organizations, many on joint recruiting missions, also sent representatives into the Deep South—preachers prominent among them—to urge the disenfranchised to come North. Negro newspapers displayed flashy advertisements—“The Flight out of Egypt” one slogan trumpeted—telling of jobs in factories and steel plants. Pullman porters slyly handed out leaflets on train platforms and inside railroad stations, with curious passengers folding the material into their purses and wallets. One representative of a Detroit organization, preparing to go South on a recruiting mission, certainly felt the emotion in a letter from a semiliterate man who wished to escape Georgia. “I am Sick of the South and always has been, but the opportunity has just come our way so help God healp and you I will soon be out of the South. I was just reading in the morning Beaumont Enterprise Paper where they Burn one of the Race to Stake for God sack please help to get me out of the South.”

In time, the flow of migration into Detroit seemed unstoppable. Germans were joined by Irish, who were joined by the French. Few, however, were as starved for social acceptance as the Negro. Between 1910 and 1930, the number of Negroes in Detroit swelled from 5,000 to 120,000. The population jump gave the impression that the metropolis was a kind of mecca. In addition to its progressive mindset, there was a constant motion and energy about 1920s Detroit. And Henry Ford’s mechanical machines played a huge role in the bustle.

Auto magnate Ford, who said his ideas often came to him while rocking in a rocking chair, had unveiled his Model T back in 1908. He constantly pondered ways to speed up production. He knew he had hit upon something with the idea of an assembly line: Workers placed at one end of the plant would pass an assembled chassis up the line; axles would be added, then the wheels, then the body. In 1913 the process could be completed in twelve hours, thirty minutes. Ford wasn’t satisfied, though; the following year the time was down to ninety-six minutes. It was taxing work, but the jobs were coveted. The carmaker—himself of Irish immigrant stock—offered a forty-hour workweek at \$5 a day. It was a handsome wage. And Negroes were hired in appreciable numbers at the Ford plant. Mindful of the social dynamics, Ford even employed a couple of Negro personnel officers. The legend of Henry Ford quickly grew; it could be heard in a 1920s ditty: “I’m goin’ to Detroit, get myself a good job,/Tried to stay around here with the starvation mob./I’m goin’ to get me a job, up there in Mr. Ford’s place,/Stop these eatless days from starin’ me in the face.”

Walker Smith Sr. was a farmer in rural Georgia. He toiled raising peanuts, corn, and of course cotton. He was small in stature—five feet seven—and possessed a powerful work

ethic. He imagined, however, that the \$10 a week he was averaging would keep him and his family swallowed in poverty forever. In 1920 relatives in Detroit boasted of “good salaries there, coaxing him to join the great exodus and come North. Smith announced to his family—wife, Leila, daughters, Marie and Evelyn—that he would venture there alone first, and if the city was to his liking, he’d send for them. There was immediate concern among family members: They’d be alone; the Southern rural darkness could be full of foreboding to a lone woman and her daughters. Smith tried to stifle his family’s concerns. He was determined to go.

Once in Detroit, it took Walker Smith little time to find employment. He found a job in construction; he began bringing home \$60 a week—six times his income as a farmer! The Georgia immigrant could only smile at his good fortune. The clothing stores in downtown Detroit dazzled Smith; he purchased new clothing—tweeds, two-tone shoes, straw hat. Because of Prohibition, the city was dry. But Walker Smith knew just where to go to get himself a drink—the darkened speakeasies in the heavily populated Negro area of the city along Hastings Street, an area known, coarsely, as Black Bottom, though its social milieu in fact included various ethnic groups in addition to numberless Negroes. (Rumrunners also slipped into the city from Canada and sold their home brew from glass jars. The rum-running was abetted by illegal gambling and prostitution, giving the city, come nightfall, a rather dangerous vibe. A feared police unit known as the Black Hand Squad patrolled the area. Confronted with the teeming nights, Walker Smith rubbed his hands together and proceeded to shuck off his country upbringing: A construction worker by day, maybe, but by night a wiry dandy who had already made enough to purchase himself one of Henry Ford’s Model T’s. Walker Smith didn’t miss the Georgia fields at all.

Months after his arrival in Detroit, he had saved enough money to send for his family to join him. Leila Smith and her daughters boarded a train, and as it chugged forward—their own family’s flight out of Egypt—they bid rural Georgia farewell. Leila Smith was happy.

Upon their arrival in Detroit, Leila reconnected with husband Walker. He was delighted to see his family together again. He ushered them into a modest home on McComb Avenue, and Leila’s daughters began helping around the house as much as they could. Walker hoped for a son.

In the ensuing weeks, Leila and her daughters—like so many newcomers—were simply stunned by the pace of Detroit: booming construction cranes; Model T’s swerving around corners; police officers with pinched faces wielding billy clubs upon the homeless. Reinhold Niebuhr—whose writings would later become influential reading for the seminary student Martin Luther King Jr.—was a young minister living in Detroit at the time. Niebuhr also found the city bewildering: “A city which is built around a productive process ... is really a kind of hell,” he felt. “Thousands in this town are really living in torment while the rest of us eat, drink, and make merry. What a civilization!”

Walker Smith, Jr.—born May 3, 1921—would spend his youngest years in this Northern environment. He was proudly named Walker, after his father. They called him Junior (Robinson’s birthplace would come, in later years, to be claimed by both the citizens of Michigan and Georgia, although Sugar Ray himself preferred Detroit.) The infant child barely saw his father, however, as Walker Sr. was now working two jobs, his second on a sewer

line. After her son's birth Leila went back to work as a maid at the city's Statler Hotel. The young child was left, for the most part, in the care of his two sisters, Marie and Evelyn. The sisters spoiled the boy by rocking him, giving him sweets, fussing over him in the coldest weather. Little Walker, however, would retain vivid impressions of his father from sweet afternoons: The father would get dressed up, stand in front of the mirror, cackling with confidence in Junior's direction. "He was a good dresser," the son would recall of his father, and his description might have summed up the evolution of his own future sartorial bent. "Conservative, but stylish. He liked dark suits—blues, grays, and browns. And I can remember that in the summer he wore two-tone shoes and a white Panama hat." The father's Model T entranced little Walker. He furtively explored the machine, once playing the part of a stowaway: "One time I hid in the rumble seat of his Ford. When I hopped out, he had to drive me home. He didn't like that because he had to use more gas. And that meant he was wasting money."

Few if any Southern migrant families could foresee what was about to happen inside the borders of Detroit in the mid-1920s. The combustion of Henry Ford's automobiles was one thing; human combustion quite another. The crowding of migrants—and foreign immigrants—meant a housing squeeze. There was an unstoppable flow of families seeking opportunities seen hustling daily from the trains down at Michigan's Central Terminal—and it started to cause painful ruptures.

Many residents of the Black Bottom area suffered from high rents, inadequate medical care, and brutish police tactics. "Black because we lived there, Bottom because that's where we were at," Walker Sr.'s only son would later lament about the Black Bottom district. And what slowly began to creep into the city's soul was Henry Ford's xenophobia.

In the summer of 1921, Ford—whose genius seemed strictly business-oriented—had approximately five hundred thousand copies of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* printed for local reading pleasure. It was a thinly veiled treatise attacking Jews, full of anti-Semitic vitriol. Bigots were the only ones who got pleasure from reading it. Ford's narrow racial views on social matters—at variance from the needs of his labor-hungry auto plants—were hardly unexpected, since they echoed much of the national discourse. President Woodrow Wilson had brought a nasty segregationist attitude with him to the White House: Negro civil servants lost hundreds of jobs with little or no explanation; the color line in social venues of the nation's capital was tightened even more. Actions—or inaction—from the top tiers of the government had a way of filtering downward. There were newspaper accounts of racial hatred across the country.

In May of 1921 in Tulsa, Oklahoma, a Negro youth, Dick Rowland, went into a downtown building to use the bathroom. A white seventeen-year-old girl claimed he attacked her. Rowland denied guilt but was quickly arrested and taken to jail. A group of local blacks armed themselves to help the sheriff protect Rowland from a possible lynching. Enraged local whites went on a rampage, galloping through the Greenwood section of the city—known as "the Negro Wall Street of America"—firing weapons at random and setting fire to buildings. Some of the fleeing blacks were gunned down from behind. A. C. Jackson was a physician who bravely stayed to give medical care to the wounded that first night. On the

second day, with his home surrounded by a sneering mob, Jackson stepped outside, the smell of ash still in the air. "Here I am," the frightened man said. "Take me." Two bullets then ripped into his chest, killing him. Before it was over, at least one hundred blacks had been killed (some accounts cite three times that number), and over a thousand homes and businesses torched. An investigation eventually exonerated shoeshine man Rowland of all charges. Not a single white person was ever arrested. Eighteen months later came another horror down South: Believing a Negro had raped a white woman in Sumner, Florida, white residents sought vengeance in nearby Rosewood, an all-black town. At least seventeen blacks were murdered. Those who saved themselves had fled with a few meager possessions into nearby woods.

In Detroit, little Walker Smith and his family soon found themselves living in a cauldron of social unease. On Christmas Eve of 1923 the Ku Klux Klan held a rally around Detroit's City Hall. They sang carols holding the hands of their children while flames from a burning cross licked at the night air. They warned of more rallies and marches.

It is little wonder that dinnertime conversation at the Smiths often reflected concerns about the city's dangers: Leila fretted about Black Bottom and the crime; she worried about the strangers who sidled up to her two lovely daughters, whispering sweet nothings; she lamented that Walker Sr. didn't spend more time with their little son. And she feared the presence of the Klan. Walker Sr., in his Panama hat, was not worrying about the social order. He was intent on playing the role of Detroit hepcat, not Georgia rube.

It was finally the actions of a Black Bottom neighbor that would justify the fears of Leila Smith and many other local blacks—fears that left Leila painfully missing quiet afternoons in the countryside she had left behind.

Ossian Sweet was one of the few Negro doctors living and working in Detroit's Black Bottom district. Born in Florida, he had obtained his medical degree from Howard University in the nation's capital. He settled in Detroit in 1921. He and his wife, Gladys, had a daughter, Iva, and with his practice doing well, they wished to purchase a home away from Black Bottom, someplace in the city that was safe and might herald their middle-class stature. They bought a home on Garland Street, sold to them by a white couple. The neighborhood was all white. The couple who sold the Sweets the house told them—disingenuously—that while they would be integrating the neighborhood, they would not face any danger in doing so. But even before the Sweets moved in, posters appeared around the neighborhood advertising their arrival, and calling for protests. Threats against the Negro family were uttered at community meetings.

On move-in day—September 8, 1925—the good doctor surrounded himself with protection, calling on his brother Henry and a group of Negro friends. Inside the house, they were well armed with guns. The first night passed with relative quiet, in spite of curious onlookers outside the windows. Before nightfall on the second day, however, more than three hundred whites had gathered near the house, all of them watched by police. Hurling stones and chunks of coal crashed onto the porch, shattering windows, causing the police to bolt into action. Ossian Sweet was determined to protect his family and property. Firing began from inside the house. With bullets whizzing, folk ducked and scattered. Voices howled. Two men—white-

were hit. They were quickly taken to a nearby hospital. Eric Houghberg would survive his wound, but Leon Breiner would not. Eleven Negroes were arrested, including Ossian's wife Gladys. Within days the national press picked up the story of a Negro doctor bent on defending his family—and of a man who lay dead. The Klan threatened reprisals.

James Weldon Johnson, the poet and literary figure, was executive secretary of the NAACP. The case of the Sweets touched him, and he decided to throw the weight of the civil rights organization behind the accused. Negro lawyers would be fine as part of the legal team, but Johnson feared they wouldn't be able to maneuver around the politics of the case, given the entrenched racism in the legal structure of Detroit. He wanted a white lawyer—an outsider—on the team, and someone with a national reputation. After much wooing, Clarence Darrow, famous from the Scopes monkey trial and renowned for championing the oppressed, joined the defense team just two weeks before the trial's beginning. The Sweet brothers and their codefendants—save for his wife, Gladys, who was released on bail—remained behind bars. Ossian was defiant. "I am willing to stay indefinitely in the cell and be punished," he said. "I feel sure by the demonstration made by my people that they have confidence in me as a law-abiding citizen. I denounce the theory of Ku Kluxism and uphold the theory of manhood with a wife and tiny baby to protect."

Negro newspapers jumped into the fray from their editorial pages. "The heroic defense of their homes exhibited by those brave and fearless Detroiters," came a salvo from a Negro publication in Philadelphia, "makes every Negro in this country their debtor." When white liberal publications chimed in, defending Ossian Sweet's right to protect his family, the NAACP knew it had backing beyond the Negro hallways of the nation. "The law in America is presumably broad enough to cover the Negro as well as the white man," the *New York World* opined—if a touch dreamily.

Clarence Darrow and his legal team went to work. "I realized that defending [N]egroes, even in the [N]orth, was no boy's job," Darrow had said. As the trial got under way, the aging, white-haired lawyer showed dramatic flourishes in the courtroom, clipping away at eyewitness testimony offered by whites.

It all ended in a mistrial, which meant the Sweets and their cohorts might still go to prison as there would be a second trial. And for that second trial, Darrow enlisted the services of Thomas Chawke, a shrewd local attorney who had made a reputation defending gangsters. Facing the jury, Chawke talked about the city, its reputation, its politics, and its future. But the crowd awaited the big man in suspenders with the dramatic face: Darrow. He also talked of community, of safety, of man's right to defend hearth and home. But he took the jurors into the very source of Ossian Sweet's American ambitions; into the very heart of the pursuit of freedom: "Prejudices have burned men at the stake, broken them on the rack, torn every joint apart, destroyed people by the million," he thundered. "Men have done this on account of some terrible prejudice which even now is reaching out to undermine this republic of ours and to destroy the freedom that has been the most cherished part of our institutions. The witnesses honestly believe that it is their duty to keep colored people out." He talked of slavery, of blood, of the long nights endured by black Americans. Summing up his argument to the jury, he said: "I ask you, gentlemen, on behalf of this defendant, on behalf of the helpless ones who turn to you, and more than that—on behalf of this great state, and the

great city which must face this problem, and face it fairly—I ask you in the name of progress and the human race, to return a verdict of not guilty in this case!”

And the jury did so. Supporters of the defendants surrounded Darrow and the other lawyers. The Sweets were finally free to go home. The NAACP celebrated the case, and invited Dr. Sweet to appear before audiences.

It was not quite enough, however, to assuage the fear that continued to grip blacks in the city. If a Negro doctor such as Ossian Sweet could have his life hanging in the balance, what might befall a common family from the South with no high connections or fancy college degrees? What calamity might befall the Smiths?

In March of 1927, Leila Smith, along with her two daughters and five-year-old Walker Jr., fled both her husband and Detroit. A train delivered them all back to Georgia. Leila Smith took the children to the home of her mother. With the children—in her mind—out of harm's way, she returned to Detroit. The South was still the South, and she needed money now being the sole breadwinner for the family. She remained in Detroit a whole year, saving her earnings.

In Georgia, little Walker Smith walked barefoot. He went hunting with uncles. “We ate well,” he would recall. “We had fresh milk from a big cow named Duck.” He witnessed the slaughtering of livestock, which shocked him. He missed his mother. Within a year Leila Smith returned to retrieve her children. In her absence, little Walker had grown extremely close to his sisters, grateful for their attempts at mothering. It was an attachment he would joyfully honor his entire life. Leila told them she was taking them back to Detroit. They wanted to know about their father, but Leila made no promises that he would be a constant part of their life. The children were surprised—and little Walker especially bewildered—but all happily boarded the train because they wanted to be with their mother.

Upon coming back to Detroit, little Walker felt a sense of *déjà vu*: “The gray of winter was in the sky. The paint was peeling on most of the houses. The yards and alleys were muddy with melting snow.”

But this time Leila Smith had a plan for her son: He'd join the Brewster Recreation Center (Membership was twenty-five cents a month.) With luck that would keep him away from the ravages of Black Bottom.

As soon as little Walker pushed his way through the doors of the center, he fell in love with it: He could swim, he could play basketball. He could paint and draw and play checkers. He came to see a kind of symphony at work: children running about who were just like him—many desperately poor like him, all uplifted by camaraderie and good times. He started seeing a big light-skinned youth around the center. Men uttered his name. The young man had won trophies while fighting in the ranks of the Amateur Athletic Union (AAU). Every other month, it seemed, Joe Louis Barrow—whose name would later be shortened to Joe Louis—won yet another trophy for the Brewster rec center. There were news clippings on the walls at Brewster about him, and every little boy and girl saw those clippings. In time, little Walker became entranced. He followed Joe Louis Barrow around like an itchy kitten. Louis's family also lived in Black Bottom, and his stepfather was yet one more laborer in Henry

Ford's employ. (John Roxborough, a Black Bottom numbers runner, financed Joe's early Detroit training and led him into the professional ranks.) It was at Brewster that little Walker himself first put on a pair of boxing gloves. No one thought much about it, though the little tyke did seem unnaturally quick—it was the way his arm would shoot out from his shoulder. But he'd as soon zip off to play basketball as box: He simply wanted to play.

A weariness, however, had already set in upon Leila Smith's life in Detroit. She could not make ends meet. No sooner would she consider a reconciliation with her husband than news of yet another infidelity on his part would stop her. He had turned into a cad and ne'er-do-well. There was that unyielding racial antagonism in the air—and the Depression was gnawing at many Black Bottom families barely holding-on. A female acquaintance told Leila to come to New York City, suggesting she could start anew there. For a single woman with three children, the decision to make such a move took uncommon bravery.

In the late autumn of 1932, Leila—a woman possessed of a stout and no-nonsense character—gathered up her family and their belongings. They went downtown and climbed aboard a bus bound for New York City. Years earlier Leila Smith had joined so many others in the flight out of Egypt; now came her flight out of Detroit. She had made up her mind she was finally going to divorce her husband, and mother and children had conspired to keep Walker Sr. unaware of the plan. Upon visiting the house and realizing they had packed and left, he quickly rolled around Black Bottom in his Model T, trying to catch a glimpse of them—of his family, his estranged wife, daughters, his only son. But no matter how fast he drove, whichever corners he turned, the Model T was useless. They were gone.

Little Walker Smith and his family settled into Manhattan. Their first home, a three-room flat in midtown, was temporary quarters. Leila found work as a seamstress. Little Walker—eleven years old in 1932—busied himself in those early months by hanging out in front of the Broadway theatres in and around Times Square. He had acquired a fondness for tap dancing and jitterbugging. Along with new friends, he showed off impromptu dance steps beneath the neon-spilling theatre marquees. They were vagabond performances. When he wasn't being shooed away, passersby dropped money at his feet: "Sometimes we'd make a couple dollars apiece on a good night," Walker Jr. would remember of the dancing. But he missed Detroit—especially the Brewster Recreation Center—and he missed his father. He sometimes journeyed down to the docks of the Manhattan waterfront and stared out at the great hulking ships. He dreamed out into the rhythm of their horns and over the open waters. He had no manly defenders and trusted no one save his mother and sisters. He was a fatherless child in an unknown city, a place bigger and even more mysterious than Detroit.

And when he barreled through the door of his home, complaining about yet another neighborhood scuffle—which he invariably got the worst of—Leila Smith showed no mercy. He was new to the community, he was going to be tested; she insisted he stand his ground. She harangued Walker Jr. about cowardice; she pushed him out the door to face his foes time and time again. His sisters fretted after him, but Leila instructed them against coddling. His eyes seemed to bore right through Walker as he stood staring at her, his very own mother who was pushing him back out toward the direction of danger.

Leila Smith had been a field hand in the South. She did not have a fragile psyche; she was

coarse and blunt and aggressive with her language. She argued with grocery store clerks over bills and she argued with rent collectors. She had lived under a roof with one man—Walker Sr.—whom she could not trust, who did not listen to her. She would not suffer such a fate again. When little Walker seemed to need a hug, he often received more tough words from his mother, stinging language about standing up, about pride. “She’d give you a fuckin’ beating if you got smart with her,” recalls newspaperman Jimmy Breslin, who got to know the family in later years and befriended Leila. “She had been a field hand in the South. No, she could be fun. But she was a tough woman.”

Economic miseries were everywhere. In 1932, millions of Americans were losing jobs by the month. Wages were down 40 percent compared to just three years earlier. Impoverished children were especially vulnerable. Little Walker, who always seemed to be hungry, took free lunches at the local Salvation Army—“hot dogs and beans,” he would sadly remember.

By the time the family moved uptown, into Harlem, Franklin D. Roosevelt had settled into the White House: His first day on the job was March 6, 1933. The patrician and former New York governor was determined to lift the country from the jaws of misery. “This nation asks for action, and action now,” he proclaimed. First there was an emergency session of Congress and following that, one hundred thrilling days of groundbreaking legislation. The president came to the aid of the banking industry. The rail system was bailed out of financial trouble, stock exchanges were regulated. He put money behind his soothing radio speeches: \$500 million flowed into every state to help the downtrodden. The Civilian Conservation Corps was established. Flooding in the Tennessee Valley was brought under control by the Tennessee Valley Authority. Unemployed men were hired for public works projects across the country: Mammoth bridges went up over San Francisco Bay and the Florida Keys.

Looking around Harlem, little Walker Smith refused to pity himself. As he knew, it would draw no sympathy from his mother. Rather, he kept himself busy. He swiped candy; he snatched fruit from vendor stands, dashing around curbsides, his chest heaving as faceless grocers yelled after him. He sold scrap wood, cans, bottles. He shot dice for nickels—earning from the odds and ends he sold—with tough-looking kids. More and more he fought back against street foes, the better to elicit smiles from his mother. (The recollections of desperate children like himself leaning into waywardness would play a powerful role in his later years.) Leila Smith saw and heard much that worried her in her new surroundings: constant sirens, the ragged children running about—all part of the unpredictable vibe of urban street life. She feared a years-long descent by her son into that dreaded state that any parent abhorred: juvenile delinquency.

What Leila Smith also noticed in her new community was the array of churches it featured. Those churches served the highbrow and the less cultured. They fed the hungry, sent masses into the streets for protest rallies, demanded better attention from Manhattan politicians. They calmed the masses during spasms of rioting. Their ministers became notable community figures, quoted in newspapers, on the radio, in national church publications. They were men like Adam Clayton Powell (Senior and Junior) of the Abyssinian Baptist Church; J. W. Brown of Mother A.M.E. Zion; Hutchens C. Bishop of St. Philip’s Protestant Episcopal; George Simpson of Union Baptist; W. W. Brown of Metropolitan Baptist; William Lloyd Imes of St. James Presbyterian; and Frederick A. Cullen of Salem Methodist Episcopal. From their pulpits they

ministers preached against vice and sloth; they abhorred the devil's presence but hardy denied it. They spoke of their congregation's young members, and the need for the adults to guide and offer instruction, to lead by example.

But there existed two Harlems: In one Harlem there were poetry readings and social teas; there were gatherings that featured notable speakers who talked about national affairs and the doings they were privy to in the Roosevelt White House. In this Harlem, the collegial sons and daughters of prominent families, home on school break, talked of their studies at Fisk, Howard, and Lincoln universities. In this Harlem there was music by the Harlem Symphony; there were NAACP galas and fraternity soirees. Paul Robeson and Ethel Waters stepped about this Harlem, and one might shake the hand of writers Wallace Thurman and Countee Cullen—the latter the adopted son of Frederick A. Cullen of Salem Methodist. One might even see a youthful Langston Hughes standing outside the Harlem Y, a parrot atop his shoulder. This was a sweet place where a Renaissance spirit blossomed like flowers, where Negro couples strolled about in raccoon coats. "A blue haze descended at night and with strings of fairy lights on the broad avenues," a cultural critic and resident of that Harlem would remember. That was the bright side of the two-sided coin of Harlem.

The other side was darker and unforgiving—and it was that side that dominated the lives of little Walker Smith and his sisters and mother. Their Harlem was a rough place, a lower-class enclave of broken families, of flophouses and boardinghouses. Of racketeers and gangsters, of big crime and petty crime. Of handouts and hand-me-down clothing, of little boys often scampering about like lambs being hunted. This Harlem had curt and exacting landlords aplenty: "Send it, and send it damn quick" was one famous landlord's consistent advice to those who were late with rent money. Little Walker Smith would recall: "Mom really had a hard time trying to feed us." The Smiths had no family references, no entrée into a more elevated society. They were invited to no formal events. They blurred into all the other anonymous faces in the community; they were scraping by in the harsh Harlem. But now and then galloping along with his buddies up and down busy Seventh Avenue, young Walker would get glimpses of that gilded Harlem—a dashing Negro couple in furs; glittering silverware behind a glass window in the hands of diners; a lone dandy leaning against a lamppost; a crowd alighting from the neon-lit Lafayette Theatre, the gleaming Model T's—like exclamation points announcing certain lifestyles; the gorgeous sepia-tinted photographs in the window of famed photographer James Van Der Zee. ("In Harlem he is called upon to capture the tragedy as well as the happiness in life, turning his camera on death and marriage with the same detachment," Cecil Beaton would say of the gifted Van Der Zee.) The unfolding scenes—the kaleidoscope of an elegant life beyond his reach—would all give pause to the young Walker Smith. And now that he knew this world existed, he would be unable to unshackle its dynamism from his boyish mind.

What FDR's government couldn't do fast enough—tackling the woes of urban communities—churches and church leaders had to do instead. In Harlem this meant the intervention of the clergy in the children's play hours. It became their mission, in any congregation where the church had enough muscle, to create activities that might fill an afternoon or evening for wayward souls. It was easy to hear the near singsong lament of mothers whose children were

getting into trouble, who were losing focus. Those mothers, more often than not, showed no hesitancy in turning to local churches for help.

“Harlem in those days didn’t have much in terms of recreational outlets,” recalls Robert Royal, who was a young boy in the community then and who would come to befriend the adult Robinson in later years.

Given such a reality, the more a minister seemed attuned to the community’s needs, the more renowned he became. The big churches pooled their resources, recruiting adults who possessed some particular expertise in an area of athletics. And before long, many of the churches had basketball teams, softball teams. But one church, Salem Methodist Episcopal, distinguished itself in a rather untraditional arena—its boxing team. “They recognized the influence of Henry Armstrong and Joe Louis,” Royal says of the Salem church officials.

Rev. Cullen, the influential leader of Salem Methodist—he lived in a lovely fourteen-room manse on Seventh Avenue—had listened raptly when members of his staff brought the idea of the boxing team to him. It was Roy Morse who had originally suggested the idea to those staff members.

Morse, born in New York City, had been a star sprinter on the track field in the city during his junior-high and high-school years, getting mentions in the press in 1910 for winning major titles. He went on to Buffalo City College in 1911, also excelling in athletics before financial hardships cut his studies short. Back in New York, sitting in the pews at Salem Methodist, Morse conferred with some of his boyhood friends who had taken up boxing and then floated the idea of a boxing club at the church. Congregants quickly approved the plan—anything to get a jump on the lurking machinery of the devil—and it was a done deal with Rev. Cullen’s approving nod.

Certain churches began to distinguish themselves by their specialties in after-school programs. “St. Philips was known then for basketball,” recalls Arthur Barnes, who grew up in Harlem. “And Salem Crescent had the fighters. If you were interested in boxing, that’s where you went to train.” Morse recruited onetime boxer and manager George Gainford to the staff. In time, Salem Crescent Athletic Club acquired a certain cachet, and it went beyond the borders of Manhattan. As Robert Royal remembers, “Salem Crescent was one of the top boxing programs in the country. If you came out of Salem Crescent, you were a proven warrior.”

Leila Smith couldn’t find a Brewster Recreation Center in Harlem, but she was desperate for her son to get involved in some type of after-school activity. Walker seemed completely indifferent to his studies at Cooper Junior High School. The boy walked the halls with a street swagger, rolling his shoulders, lingering in those hallways too long. He was late with homework assignments; school officials warned him about shooting dice. Schoolgirls dismissed him as cocky and even arrogant, his whiffs of charm not enough—not yet—to assuage concerns about his demeanor.

A neighborhood friend dragged Walker along to Salem Methodist one afternoon to show him its boxing facilities. (Young Walker knew the church because he had shot dice in the alleyway behind its ornate walls.) Walker had bragged to friends about having some boxing skills—and about having met Joe Louis. Louis would not become champion until 1937, and so in 1934 many of his friends knew nothing of the Joe Louis that Walker talked about. Those

who had heard of the fighter didn't believe him.

Salem Methodist sat at 129th Street and Seventh Avenue. It had shiny pews and love windows; Salem officials had paid \$258,000 for the chapel in 1923, during a year when Negro congregations were buying properties throughout Harlem to show their business acumen. Thirteen-year-old Walker Jr. descended the stairs to the Salem church basement, where the boxing facilities were set up. Boys his age and older were sparring, skipping rope, grunting, tying on gloves. His lit eyes jumped from scene to scene. That smell of sweat—"a strange perfume to me," he would call it—was everywhere. Because of his limited introduction to the sport in Detroit—and because he had already overstated his prowess to friends—he had convinced himself that to retreat now was to lose face. In his mind, he was right where he belonged.

This setting, he quickly concluded, might serve as an extra shield against the mean streets. His *modus vivendi* within his new surroundings was simple—he would have to hold on, just as he had been doing all his short life. He was a skinny youth who had heard of the terror that circled his Black Bottom neighborhood in Detroit and survived them. He had been whisked away from his father and did not become morose or depressed. He had committed petty acts of thievery—showing youthful courage, however misplaced—and yet had not been caught and thrown in detention. Survival was all. Now he found himself in a neighborhood rough at the best of times and now battered by the Depression, a place that could gobble him up, but he wouldn't let it. The two-sided coin of Harlem had now rolled right up to young Walker Smith. That descent into a church basement offered a kind of clarity he had never felt before. The boy—whose independent mind seems to have sprung directly from his strong-willed mother—could not allow a moment's worth of fear down where the fists were flying. Underground, he realized, for the first time in his life, he could unburden himself of little-boy worries. The officials explained to him what was expected of a member of the Salem Crescent Athletic Club, the name the young pugilists fought under. He listened—not in that unfocused way he listened to teachers at Cooper Junior High—but with genuine raptness.

He told his mother about Salem Crescent and its vaunted boxing program. He wanted to join, and his enthusiasm filled Leila Smith with joy. He would fight, just as she had long told him to, just as she herself did whenever she had to.

"Sugar Ray had a nickname for my grandmother. It was 'Punch.' That's how tough she was," says Ken Bristow, Robinson's nephew.

Leila Smith delighted in knowing that her son would have authority figures watching over him and teaching him, a mission his own father had abandoned. The Smiths were not a churchgoing clan, but Leila thought that a place that might welcome and protect her son was a divine blessing indeed.

George Gainford had been shifting around the world of amateur boxing for years. He had tried boxing in his own youth, but had been an undistinguished prospect. Upon realizing his own career had no future, he turned to managing. The few fighters he managed, however, proved unremarkable. The world of managing excited him more than anything, but opportunities for Negro managers were limited. Unlike the Negro managers behind Joe Louis's rising career, he did not have access to the ready money it took to manage or

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