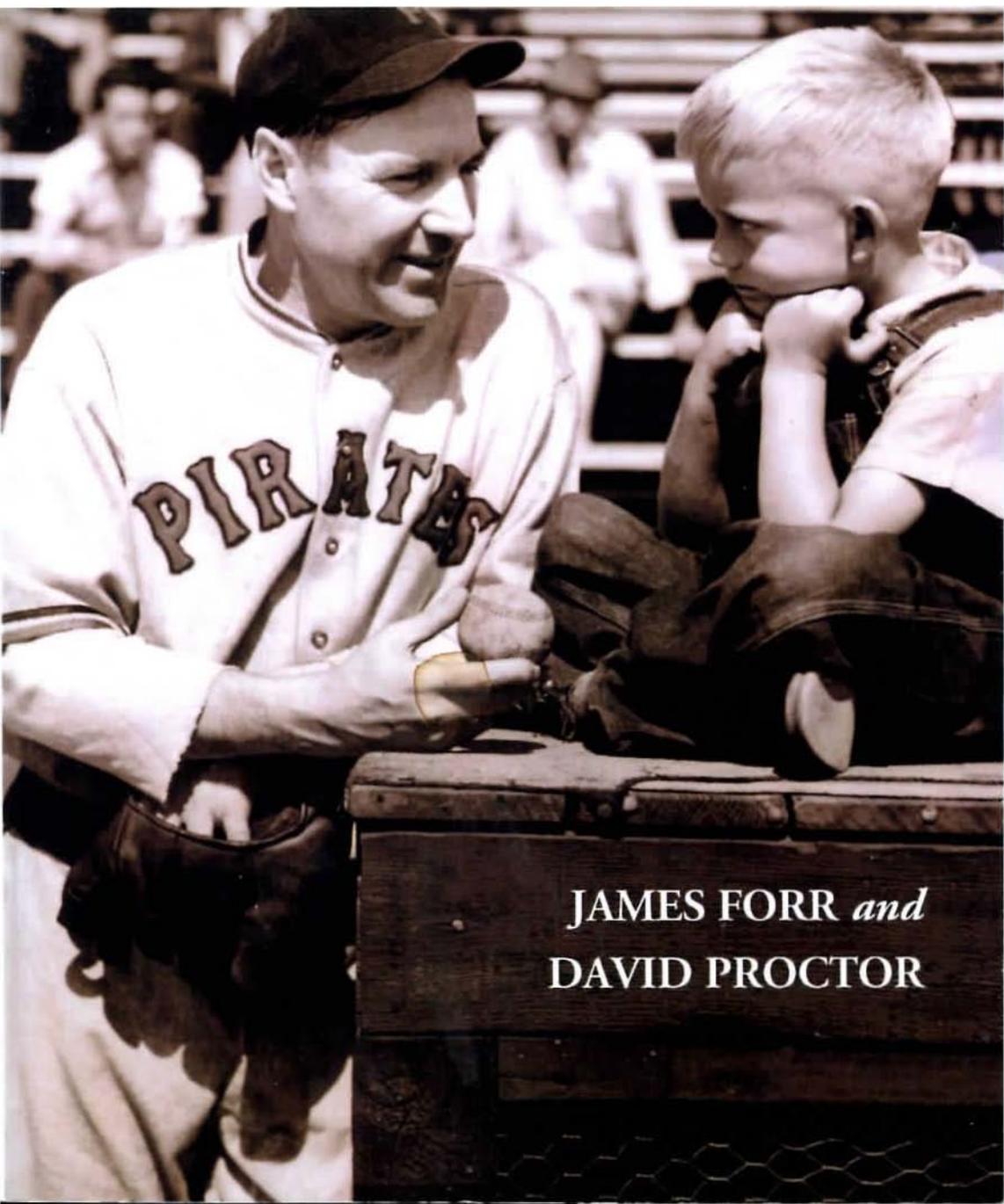


PIE TRAYNOR

A BASEBALL BIOGRAPHY



JAMES FORR *and*
DAVID PROCTOR

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On the cover: Pie and little boy on dugout
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Discovered on Cape Cod

Somerville was a cold, dark, hungry place in the winter of 1917-18. In the midst of a punishing winter, a coal shortage closed Somerville schools in December and January. The government ordered all lights in the city, except those required for public safety, to be dimmed in order to save energy. For the same reason, businesses were limited to operating from 9:00 A.M. to 5:00 P.M. Like people all across America during this time of war, city residents dealt with wheatless Mondays, meatless Tuesdays, and porkless Thursdays as a part of the government's voluntary plan to conserve food.

Everyone in Somerville had it rough, but for the Traynor family, these were acutely trying times. They might not have been dirt poor, but they weren't far from it. James Traynor's wallet was getting crunched from every angle — spiraling rents, inflation, a large family (even with Eddie in the service), and an income that couldn't keep pace with it all. His job at the *Boston Transcript's* printing press was a solid, steady position, but hardly lucrative. In 1917 he swallowed hard and surrendered the flat on Princeton Street and signed a lease on a mid-nineteenth century hovel located at 20 Woodbine Street. The timeworn cottage-style house bunched the entire family into just two rooms. It was a clear step backward.

It seems Pie began to live apart from his family at this point. On his application for wartime work, he listed his address at 15 Woodbine, across the street from his parents and siblings.¹ His reasons for renting his own place are uncertain. As would become evident within a few years, Traynor was an ambitious young man who felt compelled to make something of himself. Given that he apparently tried to sign up for the army in 1916, and that he left Massachusetts later in 1918 to take a wartime job, it seems reasonable to speculate that at age 19 he was itchy to assert his independence and strike out on his own. Or it could have been simply more about space than psychology; eight people in two rooms would have been awfully crowded. Getting a place of his own probably gave him some room to breathe.

On January 18, 1918, Traynor applied for work as an unskilled laborer at the Boston Navy Yard, which boasted one of the top amateur baseball teams in the Greater Boston area. He began work a week later but the job didn't last long thanks to his puzzling inability to show up on time. He was drummed out after a week for missing six musters, although his bosses rated his conduct "good" and the quality of his work "very good."²

How Traynor occupied his time for the next several months is mostly a mystery. The only trace of him comes in a lone Ball Square A.C. box score that appeared in a Somerville newspaper in May.³ By mid-summer, around the time his brother, Eddie, was wounded in France, Pie was gone. The War Department issued a “work or fight” order that was to take effect on July 1. Traynor opted for work, packed his things, and left his family for the first time in his life.⁴ His destination was infernal **Nitro**, West Virginia.

America’s entry into World War I created an urgent need for a huge gunpowder manufacturing operation. The War Department considered several locations, but after studying the climate, soil quality, availability of raw materials, and a number of other factors, decided to locate the plant on a large, almost completely empty swath of farmland about 15 miles south of Charleston, West Virginia. The new town needed a name. Since the specific kind of powder produced there was to be nitro-cellulose, the government landed on the name **Nitro**.

Ground was officially broken on January 2, 1918. With so many men off at war, finding manpower to build the plant and work there was a formidable challenge. The military contractor, Thompson-Starrett, set up recruiting offices in big cities throughout the country, including Boston, where Traynor signed up. Attracting men was hard; getting them to stay was even harder. During the 11 months between the start of construction and the end of the war, 110,000 people worked in **Nitro**. The average employee remained only 40 days.

In the decades following the armistice, **Nitro** evolved into a pleasant enough little town, but conditions in 1918 were abysmal. One man who arrived that summer, around the same time Traynor rolled into town, related, “Most of the streets were of mud, but wooden sidewalks were being built as fast as the help came from the farms and towns of the west, north, and south.”⁵ Environmental responsibility was not a high priority. “[T]he ether was so dad-burn thick in the air,” carped gunpowder worker Averill Casto. “Especially on foggy nights and mornings, it was so bad that you couldn’t see anything, just stagger like you were drunk.”⁶

Meanwhile, lurking in the deep recesses of everyone’s mind at **Nitro** was the very real possibility they might die there. It was not a safe place. By the end of the war, the plant was churning out 350 tons of gunpowder each day. As Traynor said, “How did I know but what there might be an explosion?”⁷ Then beginning in September, the worldwide Spanish flu pandemic rampaged through and killed more than 200 people. At the local train station, the caskets of flu victims were lined up, awaiting shipment back home to grieving loved ones.

Each day saw the arrival of close to 100 railroad cars filled with raw materials to be converted into gunpowder. Traynor was a car-checker; his job was to ride around on horseback 12 hours each day, recording information about the arrival and departure of shipments. “It wasn’t much fun,” Traynor remem-

bered.⁸ It was a grueling job that required a man to be in shape, which Traynor certainly was, and to exhibit some degree of horsemanship, where his skills were passable, at best. One of Traynor's shifts came to an abrupt, bloody end after his horse threw him headlong to the ground. His enduring souvenir from Nitro was a small scar on his forehead that never completely disappeared.⁹

It is uncertain exactly how long Traynor stuck it out. A 1934 article suggests he probably remained at Nitro until the end of the war.¹⁰ However, on September 11, 1918, he filled out a draft card, which is a clue that he might have left around this time and chosen to make himself eligible to fight.¹¹ Either way, November 11, 1918, must have been a happy day for him. It was his 20th birthday, but more importantly, it was when news of the armistice arrived in the United States. No more coal shortages, no more dreadful wartime jobs, no more risk of being shipped off to fight in Europe.

With the so-called "war to end all wars" over, Traynor returned to Somerville and re-focused on baseball. By June, he was playing for his town's premier sandlot team, the Somerville Base Ball Club. His teammates in 1919 included Ray Tift, who pitched briefly for the New York Highlanders in the American League in 1907. Traynor appeared in just six games with the Somerville B.B.C. in 1919 before moving on to bigger and better things. Years later, a Somerville reporter whipped up a fable that Traynor homered in all six of those games.¹² He did no such thing; in fact, there is no record that he homered at all. But he hit the ball well. Newspapers accounts exist for only four of the six games, but in those appearances Traynor came through with eight hits, including a double and two triples, in 17 at-bats.

But just as the Somerville B.B.C. season was beginning, Traynor found himself in the sights of a former major league pitcher who was trying to fill out the roster of the high profile independent team he coached in Cape Cod. Dave Morey was the scion of a prominent family from Malden, Massachusetts, not far from Somerville. His grandparents were pioneering abolitionists, and their Malden home was a busy way station on the Underground Railroad, which helped Southern slaves escape to freedom in Canada.¹³

Morey excelled in three sports in high school. On the diamond, he once struck out 25 batters in a game. He went off to Dartmouth College, majored in French, and developed into a feared runner out of Dartmouth's offensive backfield, making two Walter Camp All-American football teams.¹⁴ After graduation, Morey quickly signed a major league contract with the Philadelphia Athletics. The Athletics were strapped for arms at the time, and team owner and manager Connie Mack threw Morey into the fire right away, with no minor league experience.¹⁵ He allowed two earned runs in two innings out of the bullpen on his first day in uniform, sat for six weeks, and then worked two perfect innings of relief against the Chicago White Sox.

When Mack tried to send him to the minor leagues for some much-needed seasoning, Morey balked. He quickly concluded there was no reason a young