

The Man in the White Panama Hat

It is Bunker Hill Day, 1950. A morning storm hadn't stopped 100,000 people from pouring into Charlestown for its annual parade celebrating the 1775 Battle of Bunker Hill.¹ From Dorchester and Brighton they packed the "El," disgorging at the City, Thompson, or Sullivan Square stations. Lucky ones with cars jammed the streets of neighboring Cambridge and Somerville desperately looking for parking spots (another example of how little has changed around Boston.) Both would join the "Townies" along Bunker Hill and Main Street, jostling for the best views. In some places they lined up ten deep along the rain-soaked streets.

Robert Harrington was among them.

He had slept well in his new bed in the Garvey's Allston home. Blackie had been on guard, sleeping nearby on a rocking chair in Robert's bedroom (how caseworker Margaret Ryan described it in her report.) On the morning of the parade Dorothy had invited some neighborhood kids to meet Robert, but a storm washed away the intended introductory play date. When skies cleared later in the morning, she proceeded with her alternate plan to take him to Charlestown for the parade.

Had Robert ever seen a parade before?

If he had, it wasn't noted in his file. Of course, there had been parades for Memorial Day or Independence Day in Holbrook, Easton, and Pembroke, the small towns where he had lived. Maybe the Johnsons or the Bouviers drove him into Brockton, the nearby "big city," to see its annual Armistice Day parade. There he could have seen marching bands and veterans from as far back as the Spanish-American war. There was cotton candy and fireworks in the evening, too. A good parade, sure, but not nearly as big as the one he was at today. And it didn't have the man in the white panama hat.

Did Robert hold extra tight onto Dorothy when the crowd cheered loudly and lustily for the passing Marine Corps detachment? Did he notice the man in the car waving to the crowd with hooks where his hands should have been, and turn quizzically to Mrs. Garvey? Would he later find out he had actually seen, in person, war hero and movie star Harold Russell?

We don't know exactly where they stood to watch the parade. They very well might have

¹ Though ostensibly a victory by British forces, their casualties from the patriot's surprising defense of Bunker and Breed's hill led British General Clinton to write in his diary that "A few more such victories would have shortly put an end to British dominion in America."

been on Common Street, where the neighborhood kids yelled to passing officials “we want a ball field?” Or did they squeeze into a spot along Main Street, among adults who shouted at those same officials to “take down the 'El” as a passing train, as if to drive the point home, drowned out their protests. Or, maybe... possibly, they got a spot on Monument Avenue, near the end of the parade route. This was where Elizabeth Connolly, Robert's baptism witness, lived. They could have bumped into each other in the crowd and never known.

One thing was certain that wherever they stood somebody would spot the man in the white panama hat. “Here comes Jim!” they would yell. The cheers from the exuberant crowd would be louder for him than for anyone else in the parade. He was James Michael Curley. The Rascal King. The Purple Shamrock. He had been Governor, U.S. Congressman, Alderman, and State Representative and, just last November, lost election to be mayor of Boston for a fifth time. Was Curley innocently distracted as his car passed the reviewing stand where his nemesis, Mayor John Hynes, sat, when he turned to wave his panama hat to the adoring crowd on the opposite side of the street? Nobody knows. But it doesn't matter. This is James Michael Curley, adding another tale to his legend.

So many maybes and possibles about today but it's fairly certain Robert would have heard the cheers and seen Himself, James Michael Curley. Did Dorothy or John ever tell him about the time he had seen a true Boston icon? The man who “did it for a friend?” The man in the white panama hat?

She takes Robert home. The adoption supervisor would note how, after just a few days with the Garveys, he is already calling her “mummy” and him “daddy.” The best sign, ever. They put him to bed after a long, exciting day. Blackie is in his place, on guard in the rocking chair. The little boy and his new protector fall asleep.