

The Man in the White Panama Hat

It is June 17, 1950... Bunker Hill Day. A morning storm had not stopped 100,000 people from pouring into Charlestown for the annual parade celebrating the 1775 Battle of Bunker Hill. From Dorchester and Brighton, they packed cars on the "El," disgorging at City, Thompson, and 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). They joined "Townies" along Bunker Hill and Main Street, jostling for the best views, in some places ten deep along the rain-soaked streets.

Robert Harrington was among them.

He slept well in his new bed in the Garveys' Allston home. Blackie had been on guard, sleeping nearby on a rocking chair in Robert's bedroom. On the morning of the parade, Dorothy 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 so, it was never noted in his file. Of course, there had been parades for Memorial Day and Independence Day in Holbrook, Easton, and Pembroke, the small South Shore 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 would 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, 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 been on Common Street, where neighborhood kids were yelling to passing officials "we want a ball field!" Or maybe they squeezed among the adults on Main Street who shouted at those same officials to "take down the 'El'." This, just as a train passing above, drowned out their protests—a moment noted, with bemusement, by the *Boston Globe*. Or maybe, possibly, they stood 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.

Meanwhile, all along the parade route, when someone spotted the man in the white Panama hat, they would exuberantly yell "Here comes Jim!" The cheers which followed would be louder than for anyone else marching that day.

He was James Michael Curley, Boston's "Rascal King" ... its "Purple Shamrock." He had been governor, U.S. Congressman, alderman, and State Representative. The previous November, he had lost the election to be mayor of Boston for a fifth time. Did he deliberately turn away from the reviewing stand, where his nemesis and election victor, Mayor John Hynes was seated? Or was he innocently turning to wave to the adoring crowd across the street? Nobody knows, but it doesn't matter. James Michael Curley had just added another tale to his legend.

So many maybes and possibles about this day, but it's fairly certain Robert would have heard the cheers and seen the former mayor. 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 took Robert home. Margaret noted how, after just a few days with the Garveys, he was already calling her "mummy" and him "daddy." A great sign. John and Dorothy put him to bed after a long, exciting day. Blackie was in his place, on guard in the rocking chair, and the little boy and his already-devoted protector fell asleep.