

The Saga of Billy French Thomas

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Written by Jerry Wayne Davenport and Russ Buchan

(Before the actual story is presented, a few comments are needed. Sadly Billy's mother, Helen French Thomas, passed away February 12, 2007. For years she wanted her son's story to be published, and thankfully she was able to read it in print before her death. Marlene (Thomas) Rockwell sent me a copy of the story because she is so proud of her cousin. Billy and I have become friends through our email exchanges. Often I turn to him for information about old times, especially in Monteagle, Tennessee and Speegle Point at Pigeon Springs, Tennessee. He is a happy, jolly person whom I hope to meet some day. I have inserted photos for interest. There were numerous newspaper articles written about Billy. Thanks goes to my friend Ralph Thompson who was able to lift some of these photos from newsprint, and with some work made them presentable for this document. Jackie Layne Partin)



Billy French Thomas aka Billy Joe Thomas Billy with his mother Helen French Thomas

The story from "Tempo" follows:

Billy French Thomas, the son of Helen French Thomas, now 92, and Charles Henry Thomas, was born in Monteagle, Tennessee on February 14, 1933, and he modestly says, "I

was the very best valentine that my mother ever had.” Billy graduated from Monteagle Elementary School in 1947 and from Grundy County High School in Tracy City in 1951. While in high school and living with his grandparents, he was taught the fine art of making moonshine by his grandpa, George French and his uncles Glenn and John French. It was not unusual in the rural south of the time for this art to be passed on from generation to generation. When pressed he said, “This wasn’t easy to learn and even harder to forget. If necessary, I could still (no pun intended) do it today.” The area around Red Robin Springs on Monteagle Mountain was his training ground. His uncle John French now lives in Tellico Plains, Tennessee. While in high school he played baseball on the FFA team coached by Tom Clark, one of the top youth baseball teams in Tennessee during 1950-1951.

Following graduation, Billy moved from Tennessee and began his fast pitch softball career in Cleveland, Ohio, playing for the Teamsters from 1952 to 1956 with time out for the Army from February 24th, 1953 until February 15th, 1955. He played for Republic Steel from 1956 to 1962. He played in his first fast pitch softball game as an 18-year-old.

Billy was blessed with another uncle, Edgar French, whose career as an outstanding fast pitch umpire indicated that the genetic makeup for softball aptitude was strong in Billy. Edgar later married Vi Orlowe who was one of the first woman fast pitch softball players to attain world class recognition. The couple had a bicycle built for two that they rode frequently with Edgar riding up front while Vi rode in back, facing backward and waving to friends and neighbors while the unaware Edgar did all the pedaling.

Despite his legendary performances as a fast pitch softball player, softball was a hobby, a game that Billy played just for the love of playing it. Whether his representation of his employers who sponsored fast pitch softball teams influenced his steady move upward as an employee is not known. What is known is that Billy was, and is, an exemplary family man who was regularly promoted within his companies both during and after his playing days.

He married Delores Ann Glover in March of 1955, the daughter of Ethel and Buck Glover of Tullahoma. Her sister married the late Hoover Trussell of Pelham, Tennessee. Her mother passed away at 56 years of age and her dad at age 80. Mr. Clover operated a sawmill in Tullahoma for most of his adult life, cutting mostly railroad crossties. He was a very good friend of Milner Carden and taught him how to operate a sawmill. Mr. Carden also became a widely known collector of rare woods.

Billy and Ann have three sons, Jimmy Wayne, the oldest, Timothy, two years younger, and Billy Joe, seven years younger than Timothy. Billy Joe jokes, “I must have been an afterthought because I’m so much younger than my brothers.” Billy had one sister, Sally Thomas Bohannon, who passed away in May of 2005.



Top: Billy French Thomas in Korea while serving his country in the military.



Right: Billy with his wife Delores Ann (Glover) Thomas

The newspaper articles published during Billy's Ohio playing days refer to him as Billy Joe Thomas, and he is known there by that name to this day. This came about because when he moved to Ashland, Ohio to work with Faultless Rubber Co., his boss, who had just met him, introduced Billy to his fellow employees as, "My good friend, Billy Joe Thomas." As Billy says, "What could I say? Was the new kid going to correct his boss in front of the whole crew his first day on the job? So I became Billy Joe there."

Billy observed, "When I first started playing in Cleveland, there were over 400 fast pitch teams in the city alone." He added, "I never played softball until arriving in Cleveland. All we did back home in Tennessee was play baseball. There just wasn't that much soft ball."

When he started his career in Cleveland, he was actually a leadoff batter ("Believe it or not," he later laughed) and played centerfield. "I was probably the second fastest guy on my team," he insisted. Pitching didn't become his full-time softball team position until 1956. Prior to that he would throw some second games of double headers, but in '56 Billy decided "...to make a full go in the direction of the mound. I could always throw the ball hard overhand and I figured that if I could do that, I could throw it pretty hard underhand."

During the off-season he used a friend's two-car garage to start honing his mound skills, adding, "If I kept it in the garage to begin with, I figured that I had a good day." It took about four years to develop decent control. "I always threw hard, but I was wild. I might hit eight or nine guys in a game. No one ever dug in on me." He actually pitched a no-hitter one night and still lost the game.

In 1958 things began to come together on the mound, and by 1961, he had helped guide his Republic Steel team to the regional tournament in Hamilton, Ohio. It wasn't long after that, he went to Faultless Rubber Co. as a Production Supervisor and became a fixture on some of their greatest fast pitch softball teams in company history.

Between 1963 and 1967, he compiled a 108-32 record with his top seasons being 1963 (21-5), 1966 (29-9) and 1967 (32-10). In 1966 he struck out a whopping 329 opposing batters in just 252.1 innings. "We traveled all over the country in those days," remembers Thomas, "and played close to 150 games a season. The team traveled east to Rhode Island, south to Clearwater, Florida, north to Canada and west to Illinois and Springfield, Missouri."

The Monteagle right-hander says one of his biggest thrills in softball occurred in 1964 when his Faultless Rubber Co. team won the Ohio state tournament in Hamilton, Ohio. The championship game was the first softball game his mother had ever seen him play. They won in 12 innings on an opponent overthrow to first base. The ball went on into the stands where it hit his mother. They still have that ball today. He called the 1966 edition of the Faultless Rubber Co. team "probably the best team in their history." Faultless finished third in the world tournament that year in Indianapolis.

In 1967 Ann was about eight months pregnant, so Billy was afraid to leave for the world tournament. Talking over his dilemma with their doctor, the doctor said, "You have two boys already, so go on. I'll take her to the hospital if she needs to go." Billy did go and Ann patiently waited until he returned to deliver Billy Joe. Faultless finished 10th in the world tourney, and it was that year Billy won his first world tournament game against Miami, Florida.

Billy played for Faultless from 1962-67 and then left Ashland and returned to Tennessee to pitch for the Shell Oilers out of Lebanon. The man who brought him back to Tennessee was Danny Evins who was in the process of starting up a new business venture that is now known as Cracker Barrel Restaurants. He offered Billy 10,000 shares of stock in the Cracker Barrel for 50 cents per share. Billy told Mr. Evins, "I don't have the money to pay for them." Mr. Evins said, "I'll lend you the money." Billy replied, "But if the company goes broke, I won't be able to pay you back." Mr. Evins snorted, "There ain't no way we're going broke!"

We'll both be millionaires!" But the stubbornly honest Billy French Thomas thus passed up the opportunity to buy on credit stock that today is worth over thirty million dollars.

In 1970 he made Tennessee state tournament history when he pitched the first perfect game ever in the tournament. The Oilers came in fourth in the tournament even though they had come in third in each of the three previous years. After three seasons he returned to Ashland where he played softball from 1971-76. "Ashland has always been my favorite place by far," he said, "It's such a fine sports town, and it's the closest thing to southern living as you'll find outside of the south. The people are so friendly."



Billy "Joe" Thomas hurls opener.



Billy is ready to pitch.

After Billy returned to the Faultless Rubber co. lineup in 1971, he posted records of 19-5, 24-6, 15-6, 11-3, 22-7, and 13-4. His career record with Faultless showed a winning percentage of 77.1. In all, he worked about 2,000 innings for them while averaging about one strikeout per inning.

Billy participated in four Ohio state tournaments, 12 East Central Regional and in three national tournaments. He was selected All-State four times in Ohio and Tennessee, selected All Regional five times, and East Central Regional Most Valuable Player in 1966. Billy's estimated lifetime pitching record in Ohio is 350 wins that include 14 no-hitters and five perfect games. He recorded a phenomenal lifetime batting average of .363.

Vi Orlowe French spent several years keeping scorecards for baseball teams during the last years of her softball career, and it became her goal to become the first woman umpire. She managed to get on as a relief baseball umpire and later became a fulltime baseball umpire. She finally succeeded in getting what she really wanted: to umpire fast pitch softball. She and Edgar French were the first two fast pitch softball umpires at Motlow College near Tullahoma, Tennessee. The couple still had a bicycle built for two that they frequently rode around Tullahoma with the still unaware Edgar riding up front pedaling with Vi in back, facing backward and waving to friends and neighbors. Vi is still alive and lives in Cleveland, Ohio. Edgar was a superintendent at American Steel and Wire before he retired.

Billy retired as a fast pitch softball player in November of 1976 at age 43. "I didn't feel I was washed up," he stated, "and if it wasn't for all that travel I would've like to pitch for a couple more years." He explained his decision to retire because he didn't want to be remembered as one of those players "who didn't know when to quit" and hung on too long. "It's better to quit too early than too late. The tendency is to play a lot longer than you should. It's a hard decision to quit when you enjoy the game as much as I do," he emphasized.

But Billy was not through with softball. In 1977, he was named Ohio umpire-in-chief and conducted more than 50 clinics a year around Ohio to help softball players, managers and umpires better understand the game.

In 1981 he conducted three weeks of umpire clinics in Italy where softball is played under the same rules as in America. "People here have watched softball or baseball and can recognize what's going to happen. The Italians had never played the game and didn't react the way Americans would react." In this country there are arguments, but teams and umpires have mutual respect. "Not so in Italy," Billy states, "There's a mortal conflict between managers and umpires. The umpires anticipated arguments but not to position themselves to make calls. The sequence was usually the umpire would make an out-of-position call, immediately face the batter's dugout and wait for the manager to race toward him screaming. The two would get face to face yelling until one would grab the hands of the other and neither could talk any more. The argument was over." But the Italian umpires eventually learned to get themselves into the proper positions to make calls.

In 1982 Billy was promoted to the position of Manager of Rubber Manufacturing at Faultless where he stayed until he retired from the company.

Billy had been hard of hearing for years and was finally persuaded to get a hearing aid. He said the first thing he did after the hearing aid was installed was to go to a restroom. "Wow!" he said, "Man I thought that I had just walked underneath Niagara Falls!" Time has not diminished his puckish sense of humor.

In 1986 Billy was inducted into the Fast Pitch-Slow Pitch Ohio Hall of Fame in Hamilton, Ohio. "It was quite an honor," he said about the induction ceremony. "What made it special was that my whole family was able to be there. My mom came up from Tennessee to join us."

Today Billy, retired and living in Smyrna, Tennessee, reflects on fast pitch softball, "Hitting a moving ball with a small stick is still the hardest of any thing in the world of sports, whether it is a baseball traveling at 90 miles an hour from 60 feet away or a soft ball traveling at 100 miles an hour from 46 feet. And hitting a fast-pitched softball (from that distance) might be the hardest of all."

After he retired from playing, the number of teams dwindled but had better players, the "weak sisters" having folded. Billy noted, "The athletes keep getting bigger, stronger and fast, and they keep getting better and better."

Billy really perked up when asked about the rise of women's fast pitch softball. "I think that fast pitch softball for women is the greatest thing to happen in sports," he asserted and added, "The quality of women's fast pitch softball today is about where the men were 30 years ago and improving. Almost like the men, they keep getting a little bigger, much stronger and faster, and they keep getting better and better." Billy was on the Olympic Selection Committee that picked 15 women players to go to the first year of the Pan American games.

He snorted and expressed disgust and disappointment that women's softball has been taken from the Olympics. "The women are more dedicated to the sport than the men. And they don't argue or bicker – they just tell the umpire when a bad call is made and get on with the game," he stated.

When Billy French Thomas finally retired from active involvement, the world of fast pitch softball lost an extraordinary set of talents and a fine southern gentleman.

(Note: Published with the permission of Billy French Thomas, The Grundy County Herald and Russ Buchan---*Jackie Layne Partin*)

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