

There is a theory that every Canadian is related to a NHL player. I disagree. I don't think it necessarily has to be NHL. It could be the PCHL with players like the Patrick brothers, the NHA with Joe Hall, Cyclone Taylor or independent teams like Dawson City or Rat Portage. The theory that I believe is, every Canadian is related to a hockey player who played in a league or series which had the potential to be Stanley Cup champions at the end of the season.

For me, it's my great-great uncle Herbert 'Hib' Milks. He played mainly for the Pittsburgh Pirates in the late twenties. The team had the same logo as the baseball Pirates. My great-great uncle was a 5'9 165 pound left shot first line winger on a second tier team. The Pirates were not good by any stretch of the imagination.

Hib and my great grandfather, Hugh, were farm boys from Eardley, Ontario near Ottawa. The Milks have owned the land since Edward Milks cleared away the bush back in 1852. My cousin Teddy is the current Milks farmer on the land.

Hugh was the eldest of the two brothers, which, I guess, means the maturest. He worked the farm as a boy, while Hib (3 years younger) played shinney with his school friends. He never complained about doing the extra chores. He married Iris, my great grandmother, at 18 and by the time Hib was a NHLer, Hugh was a father of four.

Neither brother fought in the war to end all wars but both mourned the day legendary Ottawa Senator "One-Eyed" Frank McGee died in action. By 1919 Hib was living in Ottawa playing for the Gunners, a senior hockey team. He scored 6 goals in 7 games in the 1921 Allen Cup final but Ottawa lost the series. In 1923, he began playing for the Pittsburgh Yellow Jackets of the USJHA. When the team turned pro in 1925, Hib joined them.

My great-great uncle Hib Milks became a NHL player with the Pittsburgh Pirates! He scored 14 goals his rookie season, 16 the next and a career high 18 his third season. Today that would make him a 30-goal scorer - an Adam Graves, Mike Johnson or Cory Stillman. Like I said the Pirates were not good by any stretch of the imagination. However, that first season he played on a line with Lionel Conacher! - Canada's athlete of the first half of the century.

By 1930, the NHL was in trouble. The depression would see the end of the Maroons, Quakers, Senators and Pirates. The Pirates moved to Philadelphia for 1 dreadful season (Hib scored 17 goals) before they too suspended operations. Hib was the only player to play every season for the Pirates/Quakers franchise. The New York Rangers picked him up for one goalless

season. The next year he was home in Ottawa playing for a team which had sold off all of its stars, most notably King Clancy, just to stay afloat. On January 4th, 1933 Hib blew his knee in a game against Detroit. His career was over. 317 games played, 87 goals and 128 points. He played in 3 playoff rounds in his career - never advancing to the second round and never registering a point.

Hib lived a year at the farm which he spent 6 months in bed recuperating from his bad knee. He couldn't do chores but he would look after the boys. My grandpa, Nick, was the youngest and he said having Hib home was the best time of his life. Hib would tell stories about his NHL days to the boys. He would describe New York City, Montreal, Eddie Shore, Foster Hewitt and Maple Leafs Gardens. He called the Gardens "a cathedral built to worship hockey gods". At first they would listen to Senator games on the radio but by the end of the 1933 season the team moved to St. Louis. The winter of 1934 the family became Leafs fans, listening to Foster Hewitt describing the heroics of the Kid Line. The family would argue endlessly on whom was better. Hib sided with my grandpa. They were both Busher Jackson fans.

By the summer of 1934, Hib knew he had to go. There wasn't enough work and food on the farm for him. Jobs were scarce in the area so he would ride the rails to Vancouver. Before he left, my great grandmother sold her Sunday shawl to buy pencils, paper, envelopes and stamps. She told Hib, he had to write to the farm - and he did. He wrote from Sudbury, Kenora, Winnipeg and Yorkton, Saskatchewan. However it was from Yorkton that family never heard from him again.

My grandpa would tell me stories of what it was like for his uncle. Hib started playing just as the NHL was establishing itself as a social fabric. He started playing with outdoor rinks and dressing rooms with wood stoves. He played against Cyclone Taylor, in an exhibition game when he was 17. Cyclone Taylor! - with no disrespect to Trekiak, the greatest player not to play in the NHL. During his days with the Pirates he played against Hap Day, Ace Bailey, Dit Clapper, Eddie Shore, Newsy Lalonde and Howie Morenz. Player weren't paid well back then (there was a salary cap of \$35 000) but whatever Hib could afford to spare went to the farm back in Eardley. The farm wasn't struggling but Hib remembered the sacrifices his brother made and, besides, he knew a family could always use a little extra money.

By the time his career had ended Hib had witnessed arenas built from wood for public skating to arenas built as cathedrals, a place to worship hockey gods. Forward passing was introduced in the middle of his career. Foster Hewitt was just coming into his own and an All-Star game was still two years away when Hib's career ended.

One day after my grandpa repeated another of his Hib stories I asked him what did he think happened to Hib in Yorkton. He looked at the floor and began to tell me something I had never heard about Hib before.

He said to me "Riding rails was a tough thing, especially for a man with only one good knee. CP and the Grand Trunk Railway didn't like people riding the rails, you know. They would hire thugs to beat up anybody caught riding. To avoid a good thumping, riders would have to jump out early, before the train reached the station or yards. This meant jumping out at tremendous speeds in the dark." He paused for a moment as if he was refueling. "Three things could have happened to him. One - he jumped out at a good speed and hit something maybe a sign or a tree and died on the spot. Second he could have been killed by one of those hired goons. They were hired to beat but nobody cared if they beat a guy to death. He paused again for a moment as his left hand wiped the tears from his eyes. "Third, there is a town just west of Moose Jaw on the rail line called Herbert. I like to think he jumped out and bumps his head on something, maybe a fence post. A nice lady is out for a Sunday stroll, finds him and brings him back to physical health. The bump on his head gives him amnesia - he can only remember his first name. That's why he stopped writing to us. The nice lady doesn't care about his memory loss and falls in love with him. He works for his father-in-law's business and, later, became a town elder man, like the way Benny is today in Eardley." Benjamin Millar is a 92-year-old man who walks to the restaurant everyday, twice a day. He has two canes and everybody in town adores him. "When he died they changed the name of the town to Herbert, in honour of my Uncle Hib". He looked up at me and smiled.

"That's the one I like to believe, Harry."