
Opening Extract from...

Liston & Ali

The Ugly Bear and the Boy Who Would Be King

Written by Bob Mee

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The Ugly Bear and the Boy Who Would Be King

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EDINBURGH AND LONDON

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INTRODUCTION

In Louisville, Kentucky, in July 2004, to cover what turned out to be Mike Tyson's unexpected defeat by the London heavyweight Danny Williams, I sought out Muhammad Ali's childhood home. As Sky colleague and friend Dave Culmer and I drew up opposite the white-boarded house, by complete coincidence BBC men Mike Costello and Steve Bunce were there, interviewing Ali's brother, Rahaman. When they had finished, I had a chat with Rahaman, sitting on a step under a tree. In the summer sun, he dropped his voice a little for just the briefest of moments and recalled how he and Ali used to sit there as boys, dreaming their dreams of all they might do with their lives. There was no need to fill in the pause that followed. Finally, he said: 'Don't feel sorry for Muhammad. Because Muhammad don't feel sorry for himself.'

Tyson was to box Williams in the Freedom Hall, where long, long ago Ali had made his professional debut against Tunney Hunsaker, a part-time fighter and full-time policeman from Fayetteville, West Virginia. Tyson had also gone to see Ali's old house. A police officer had given him a lift. In that week, Tyson seemed to know his time in the business that had made and broken him was almost up. He also knew that in years to come nobody would be making small but splendid pilgrimages to the house where he had been raised. Nobody would be opening, as they were shortly to do in Ali's honour in Louisville, a museum in his name.

There aren't any museums in Sonny Liston's name in St Francis County, Arkansas, either.

There are those who have seen a little bit of Liston in Tyson: the darkness, the apparent ability to self-destruct, the tendency to embrace chaos at every turn. There was, however, no similarity in the way they expressed themselves in interview. Tyson laid out either himself or the side of himself he chose to be on that particular day to be picked over by anyone who was paid to be there. To understand how manipulative Tyson was you had to become experienced at listening to him. It is fairly safe to believe that listening to Liston was an

altogether different experience. If Sonny gave writers more than a sentence or two, it took on the significance of the Gettysburg Address.

When I began this book, I looked back at my Louisville notes for one of Tyson's confessional monologues in front of writers. His words carried an intimacy that led some to claim he had spoken to them and them alone. Perhaps that is why, in spite of all that he did, Tyson in general received a pretty sympathetic press. Liston got little or no understanding. Neither did he ask for any.

In Louisville, Tyson said:

> The pressure of fighting, it drives you crazy. Some guys do crazy things. It's all very well calling a fighter a nut, but you don't know the pressure of getting bashed upside the head in front of, say, 100,000 people . . . Sometimes when you are successful you get a lot of money, but it restricts you from being you. I'm pretty cool now. I'm rounded . . . but if somebody gives me a whole garbage can of money, I might start being a psycho. I have mistreated a lot of people. I was a monster not too long ago . . .

At the end of 2006, I was in Little Rock, Arkansas. Again, on a day when work was slow Dave Culmer and I took a trip out into the cotton fields. We went up the interstate towards Memphis, pulled off at a place called Palestine and turned north into the cotton fields and swamps. There isn't anything or anybody to tell you where Sonny Liston was born and raised. One or two might guess, but that's all it would be. We drove up dirt tracks where Liston might have walked, past creeks where he might have swum. We were in the right area of St Francis County, near Johnson, where the piece of land called the Sand Slough was. Liston was born there in a fragile wood-board shack. His mother, Helen, once said she put cardboard on the walls to keep out the wind. That home, from three-quarters of a century ago, would have been long gone.

As we eased the hire car over the rutted tracks, the satellite navigation system stopped working. Out of the car, with the bare land stretching to the horizon on one side and a swamp full of dead trees on the other, it was eerily quiet. I took a few strands of cotton left behind after the harvest (and have them still in the drawer of the desk at which I write). For a fleeting minute or so, I could feel what it might have been like to grow up here, to know this and only this, to live in a time where the past was remote and confused. And without the past, what could the future have meant? The Listons, Helen and her husband Tobe, who was the son of a slave, bent their backs over these cotton fields for a meagre living until some time in the mid-1940s when Helen walked out for

a dream of prosperity and a back that ached less. Sonny went too and, as far as anybody knows, never came back.

Dave and I, enriched by whatever it was that we learned, pulled out along the dirt roads, back to a place the sat-nav recognised, on to tarmac and the twenty-first century, ate at a friendly place called Catfish Island, left it at that.

Liston's resting place is easy to find: it's in Paradise Memorial Gardens, Las Vegas, under the flight path of planes landing at McCarran International Airport. You'll see his metal plaque on the ground near the place where they bury babies and children. The plaque says: 'Charles "Sonny" Liston 1932–70' and below, starkly, 'A Man'.

From the moment I read the newspaper and magazine cuttings handed down to me by the journalist and television commentator, Reg Gutteridge, I wanted to use them to explore the story of Ali's two controversial world heavyweight championship fights with Liston in 1964 and 1965. The first ended with Liston, supposedly one of the toughest men ever to walk this planet, sitting in his corner complaining of a sore shoulder, and the second was a muddled first-round knockout that had people yelling 'Fix, Fix, Fix!' in the arena.

It was a volatile, unpredictable time in a country troubled almost to breaking point. Ali, when he was still Cassius Marcellus Clay Jr, challenged Liston for the title only three months after the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. The man arrested for killing him, Lee Harvey Oswald, had been killed even before extensive interviews could be carried out. Oswald's murderer, Jack Ruby, claimed he acted alone on a furious impulse. Very few believed him.

Slavery had been abolished a hundred years before, but African Americans were still in psychological chains, battling for the right to be educated, to walk the streets without worrying which white person they might bump into, which seat on a bus they might flop into, or into which eating house they might walk and ask to be served.

To be black in America in the early to mid-1960s was to be a part of an underclass, separated from the rights granted to all Americans by their own constitution. The peaceful, honourable Civil Rights movement was, in the north at least, the acceptable face of the quest for change, but, as always in times of social strife, there was reaction and counter-reaction. Protest and resistance take many forms, and there were those who preached violence and even segregation. One such organisation was the Nation of Islam, and it was to this group that the young Cassius Clay would turn. Suddenly, after winning the heavyweight title, he was no longer the brash, funny, irritating boy with God-given speed in his feet and fists but a misguided champion of a shadowy, subversive cult that seemed to counter racism with racism. On top of that, Ali, as he became, proclaimed his opposition

to the Vietnam War, which was perceived at that time by most Americans as a just war against a genuine Communist threat. He rejected what the majority, black as well as white, felt was the responsibility of every fit American male of suitable age: he refused to do his duty and was, well, just so ungrateful.

The flipside of Ali was Liston, who had no apparent political or religious beliefs, no apparent interest in the well-being of anybody outside his own household, and who had Mob connections. Some said Liston was manoeuvred by the criminal underworld from the moment he stepped into a professional ring, not long after he was released from a Missouri prison, until the day he died in mysterious circumstances in that Mob paradise, Las Vegas.

The cuttings collected by Reg Gutteridge when he was working on the fights between Ali and Liston paint a dramatic picture of a world now consigned to the past. I felt it would be an exciting adventure to use them to recreate what it was like to be there at that time. Too many histories rely on memory, on interviews carried out long after the event, and while some of these can provide material of value too often they are unreliable. I acknowledge that sometimes it takes a while for truths to emerge but against that memories are so often altered to suit an agenda or are inaccurate. That is why I felt Reg's mass of contemporary material was so relevant. He knew about this project before he died and was happy for it to happen.

I am English and this story will be published, at first, in Britain. Therefore, I would ask any American readers for a degree of tolerance. Some of the knowledge you have learned from the cradle is not taken as read by a British audience.

It has been an amazing journey of discovery. I knew Liston's tendency to be virtually monosyllabic with the media allowed them to build a myth of the brooding, menacing ogre, but I found, yes, a sad man but one with a strange sense of humour, if not haunted then certainly made suspicious by a world that gave with one hand and snatched away with both, a man who sought redemption and acceptance by winning the heavyweight championship of the world but who found only disappointment, rejection and constant reminders of the moral debt it was felt he owed his country. In the end, I found a disillusioned man who became what it seemed the world wanted him to be. Reg always said beneath the surface Liston had a vulnerable heart. I believe him.

I have explored the heritage and childhoods of both men in an attempt to provide detail, and I hope this helps the understanding of what made both men who they were. Neither man's childhood and adolescence were particularly significant to writers at the time, of course, and inevitably details of those early years have had to be pieced together and reassessed from earlier historical accounts.

I take in Liston's championship wins over Floyd Patterson and then the fights with Ali – including the one that never happened and which has so often been ignored, when Ali was struck down by a hernia that some suspected might have been the result of his being poisoned. I listened to the first fight live on radio in the middle of the night at the kitchen table of our home in Leicestershire when I was ten years old. My father woke me, and we tiptoed downstairs. He put his finger to his lips and whispered: 'Don't tell your mother.' I remember wanting Liston to win and not knowing why. The rematch, of course, was the bizarre night in the small town of Lewiston, Maine, which for a modern equivalent might be the same as a Lennox Lewis–Mike Tyson fight descending on Whitby or Southwold.

I feel that by investigating the combined stories of Liston and Ali through the newspapers and magazines of the time, and film footage, I have discovered a little more about what it was like to be there at this tumultuous time in history. I was a child when these events happened, and I knew about Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, the race riots and the war in Vietnam but I had not appreciated the details of the African American struggle, the day-to-day reality of what it must have been like to have been born black in this most complex of societies.

Shortly after completing the first draft, after considering what Ali meant for my generation, yes as a boxer, but also as a symbol of resistance, of the right of the young or the disenfranchised to challenge the perceptions of the moral majority, on 20 January 2009 I was driving on an English motorway, listening to the radio. Barack Obama took the oath as the first black president of the United States of America, an event that would have been unthinkable in the 1960s when black people had to steel themselves to find the courage to take up a place at a certain school or university, let alone sit in government. I pulled into a service station to listen as the speech began with the words 'I stand here today humbled by the task before us, grateful for the trust you have bestowed, mindful of the sacrifices borne by our ancestors . . .'

Obama was talking for all America to all America, but to African Americans his words obviously carried extraordinary significance. I didn't know then that among the crowd sat the 67-year-old Muhammad Ali, once so vocal, so full of loud, opinionated, resistant youth and now dimmed by the onset of Parkinson's and wrapped up in a black overcoat, scarf and hat, with a blue rug over his knees to keep out the cold. We don't know what Ali thought as he sat there, but it was good, and poignant, that he lived to see it.

I hope you enjoy this story as much as I have investigating and writing it.

1

MAYBE THEY THINK I'M SO OLD BECAUSE I NEVER WAS REALLY YOUNG

Charles 'Sonny' Liston's grandfather, Alexander, was a slave on the sprawling farm of a white landowner, Martin Liston, between Poplar Creek and Huntsville, Mississippi, not far from Winona on what is now Interstate 55. African slaves lost their names, and, out of convenience if nothing else, once freedom came it became normal practice to identify themselves by using the name of their former owners. And so Alexander, who called himself Alex, became Alex Liston.

The lot of the slave was romanticised by 'white' literary fiction, and in many of the movies of the first half of the twentieth century the sun shone, the Negro slaves sang as they toiled in the fields of benevolent masters and mistresses. The men were strong, the women plump. The truth is that African people were systematically stripped of their dignity for generation after generation until the vast majority no longer knew who they were or where their grandparents and great-grandparents had lived. Even when slaves tried to build new family lives they did so often only to have them torn apart when children, husbands or wives were sold on. A Quaker from Virginia once described the misery: 'Husbands and wives are frequently separated and sold into distant parts. Children are taken from their parents without regard to the ties of nature, and the most endearing bonds of affection are broken for ever.'

When freedom eventually came, there were those who restlessly travelled the country searching for loved ones. In the 1870s and 1880s, newspapers for black readers carried a steady stream of notices taken out by people anxious for knowledge of the whereabouts of wives, brothers or sisters, parents or children. What were people to do if their families were in pieces? The temptation must have been to drift, but this would have been balanced by worry that if the missing loved ones came back there must be somebody still there to welcome them.

Slavery left its survivors with psychological as well as physical scars and with damage that would be passed on through their children and children's children. For generations, their role had been to serve and to work. Education, if any benevolent owner bothered to give them any, was minimal. Therefore, in the world that the freed slaves were cast into, there were very few lucrative careers open to them. Their inclination would have been to act as they knew best, to work the land or, if they drifted to towns and cities, to work for others, often for menial wages with no rights to speak of. And for white people, the idea that blacks could contribute to the whole by taking responsible posts would have been alien. They freed the slaves, but they expected them to carry on their role as third-class citizens, and the easiest way for people to enjoy their freedom rather than discover troubles and difficulties through it was to conform. Black people remained poor, uneducated, uncertain where they had come from or where they might go.

Although upon receiving his freedom Alex Liston could have travelled, he chose to stay close to home. With his wife, Fannie, and their first four children, Ned, Rachel, Joseph and Frank, he set up on land near that belonging to Robert Liston, son of the man who had owned him. Perhaps he or Fannie had family who might come back, or perhaps they just felt safer and more comfortable closer to what they knew and where pretty much everybody knew everybody else. Local churches were focal points for these spread-out but relatively insular communities. Martin Liston was one of the founders of Bethel Methodist Church on the Bethel Road which links highways 407 and 413, and there was a baptist church used by black folk at Pinkney Grove, and another, called Shiloh, not far east of Poplar Creek.

According to the 1910 census, Tobin Liston, Sonny's father, was born in January 1870. Another family in the area were the Winfreys, ancestors of the television host, Oprah (though she has said the roots were purely biological, she had no other connection with them). One of the Winfrey daughters, Cornelia, known as Cora, married Tobin Liston in 1889. He was 19, she was 16. Their first child, Ernest, was born in Kilmichael, Mississippi, in November 1889. More than 40 years would separate Ernest, known as Ernie, from Charles, known as Sonny, but they were half-brothers.

Over the next twenty years they had a total of thirteen children, seven of whom were still surviving by 1910, when they were still in Mississippi. At some point in the next five years or so, either the marriage ended or Cora died, and Tobe took up with a young girl, Helen Baskin, who was nearly thirty years younger than him. It was Helen Baskin, who became Helen Liston, who was Sonny's mother.

Helen was born in February 1898 to Martha Baskin, who married Joe McKelpin the following year. He might or might not have been Helen's father, but in 1900 they were living in Poplar Creek, near the Listons, listed under the name Kelpa. They had another newborn daughter, Ida. Like Alex and Fannie Liston, they were illiterate farming folk, renting or sharecropping.

When Helen was 17, she gave birth to a child named Ezra Baskin Ward, on 6 August 1915. His father was Colonel Ward, son of a sharecropper named Jerry Ward. Colonel was not a military rank but his given name. In the 1910 census, Colonel was newly married to a 17 year old named Mattie. Perhaps he was still married when he became the father of Helen's son, or perhaps not. Perhaps he might have wanted to settle down with Helen but could not, or maybe he was just another married man with a wandering eye. Ezra, known as E.B. Ward, was under the impression that Colonel died not too long afterwards and that he was 'poisoned by a lady'.

Tobe and Helen went looking for a fresh start, moving across the state line into Arkansas with those of Tobe's children who still needed looking after or who wanted to go. Helen left the infant E.B. behind in the care of her mother, Martha. They found a place to call home in the area of open land north west of Forrest City in St Francis County and settled down to sharecrop, paying rent in the form of three-quarters of what they grew to the landowner, a black farmer named Pat Heron. Helen said Tobe loved it, and she knew he would never leave.

Almost half a century later, Sonny Liston would tell the Kefauver Committee, during its investigation into Mob involvement in boxing, that his father had 25 children. He didn't know exactly how they were divided up between his mother and Tobe's first wife, Cora, but he tried to remember those he had known in an interview with *Sports Illustrated*, published on 17 July 1961.

> My mother had either 12 or 13 children. No, I'm sure it was 13. E.B.Ward, he's the oldest, a boy child almost 40 years old now [in fact, he was 45]. It's been a good while since I seen him. Next comes J.T. I always call him Shorty. And he's close behind E.B. After J.T., there's Leo and then my sisters Clarety [Clara T.], Annie and Alcora, Curtice [Curtis], me and Wesley. Annie and me was closest, and I see a lot of her. She always kids me because I was bigger than her, yet she would rock me to sleep. Curtice and J.T. get together with me sometimes, and I saw Wesley, the baby, in '58 or '59, but the others have wandered off someplace.

Leo Liston was said to have been shot dead in Michigan; Annie and Curtis moved to Gary, Indiana; Annie married a man named Wallace. Curtis and Alcora,

who was supposedly as quiet as Sonny, both died in 1982 in their early 50s. Helen Liston told Sonny's first biographer, A.S. 'Doc' Young:

> All my children grew fast. They were healthy children. I made them go to bed early. They didn't have any television to watch until twelve o'clock at night. My children ate their food, washed their feet and went to bed after it got dark.

The best we can do in identifying Tobe's legion of children is by looking at the census returns. Surprisingly, given what we are told by Helen in Young's book about Tobe's attitude to education – that he considered if a child was old enough to sit at the table and eat, then it was old enough to work in the field – he always declared he could read and write.

Cora stated in the 1910 census that six of her thirteen children had died, which leaves Ernest (b. November 1889), Bessie (January 1891), Latt (October 1894), William (October 1895), Jane, who becomes James in another census! (December 1897), a daughter whose name is too faintly written to be legible (1901) and Cleora (1905). Then in the 1920 census we also find Ada (1910) and Willie May (1913), which makes a total of 15 for Cora.

The 1930 census shows that Helen, after E.B in 1915, had Clara T. (1919), Glitt, aka Clytee (1920), J.T. (16 August 1921), Leo (1923), Annie (1924), Alcora (November 1927), Curtis (15 October 1929), which just leaves Charles and Wesley to come after 1930.

From the moment he rose to the top of the heavyweight division at the turn of the 1960s, Sonny Liston's background and age was a subject for sometimes wild conjecture. Some said he might have been born as far back as the early 1920s and for years he added to the mystery, claiming at various times to have been born in Little Rock or Pine Bluff, Arkansas, and even Memphis, Tennessee. When a date of birth was needed for him to enter the 1953 Golden Gloves tournament, 8 May 1932 was settled on. Very few believed him. Not many believed his mother, Helen, either when she said, in talking to Doc Young, that she thought it was 18 January 1932.

Part of the problem was that Sonny did not know himself. Why would he? Out in the place he was raised in the Sand Slough, in the wide open farming lands of Arkansas, men and women lived by seasons, by the times of the year when jobs needed doing to grow their crops of cotton, corn, sweet potatoes and whatever else they could. As year piled upon year, it is easy to understand that, with nothing written down, exact dates could become hazy and unimportant.

Father Alois Stevens, who encouraged Sonny's boxing while he was in jail in St Louis, said:

> We tried to get his birth certificate for the Golden Gloves, but it was impossible. Sonny was born in Arkansas country, and I'm afraid in those days officials weren't particular if they recorded the birth of a Negro child or not.

When it emerged, by his own admission during his time as heavyweight champion, that he had daughters of 17 and 13, the theory that he was much older than he said gathered in strength. These daughters, however, remain shadowy figures who lived with him and his wife Geraldine for a time and then appeared to drift into obscurity. And, of course, Sonny looked as if he aged ten years in half an hour when he lost his world title to Cassius Clay in Miami in 1964. His age became something of a joke.

This would remain a detail of minor significance were it not for the effect the speculation and scepticism had on Liston. Jack McKinney, who wrote for the *Philadelphia Daily News*, said:

> When guys would write that he was 32 going on 50 it had more of an impact than anybody realised. Sonny didn't know who he was. He was looking for an identity, and he thought that being champion would give him one. Sonny was so sensitive on the issue of his age because he did not really know how old he was.

While it is probable that he did not know the exact truth, he knew what he was saying was not that far out. It can only have aggravated his sense of isolation to have nobody believe him. Once, Liston, pondering the scepticism, said: 'Maybe they think I'm so old because I never was really young.'

The impression that he did not seem to be able to tell the truth about his age widened the already substantial social gap between Liston and the writers. Here was a man who, by the time they knew him, had already been jailed for a series of dumb, thuggish street crimes and again for attacking a police officer; a man whose ring career appeared to be controlled by the odious mobster Frankie Carbo; a man who had supposedly worked as a strike-breaker for the Mob in their St Louis factories; and who could barely be bothered to react when asked the simplest of questions, like when and where he was born.

In the eye of the moral majority, which tended to be condescending when dealing with people who were uneducated, poor and black, Liston had little or nothing to recommend him. He was a bum from a bad background and could

barely write his name. That was all they needed to know. Given his ability with his fists, it was only a small step for the newsmen of the world to create an ogre out of a mixed-up, largely dysfunctional, ostracised man.

The story that Sonny was brutalised by a violent, merciless father has all too easily been accepted. 'The only thing my old man ever gave me,' Liston was quoted as saying more than once, 'was a beating.' He gave the impression that he was whipped by his father whenever the old man's mood took him. Tobe, of course, was not around to deny the allegations. He had died in hospital in Forrest City, Arkansas, on 22 November 1947, when he was 77 years old.

It is possible that when Sonny was young, Tobe whipped him hard enough to leave physical and psychological scars. By Helen's testimony to Doc Young, the young Charles was not the fastest of workers in the field. If Tobe, in trying to teach his children to farm the land and help the family grow enough to survive, lost his temper with any or all of them and went too far in punishing them, there would have been nobody around to remonstrate. By the time he was eight years old, Helen said Charles was working full time in the fields. He had not had enough time to learn to read and write.

If the systematic whippings happened, it is likely this was when Charles was very young, for by the time he was 11 or 12 Tobe would have been in his early 70s. Helen also told Doc Young that she herself was 5 ft 1 in., and that Tobe was 5 ft 5 in. She thought Sonny might have got his heavyweight build from an uncle, who was large. And so while little old Tobe might have retained an intimidating psychological authority over his big adolescent son, it is hard to imagine him handing out much in the way of corporal punishment. Helen came to her late husband's defence: 'He didn't whip them as much as people say he did. But he hollered at them a lot. The biggest thing he did was whoop and holler. He whooped and hollered so much nobody paid any attention to him.'

What is beyond dispute is that Sonny had no time for his father. I have discovered no kindly or forgiving reference by the son about the father. He resented the way he was treated, and it is easy to see how a boy, who would naturally want to be loved and approved of, could be hurt and damaged by what he perceived as rejection. The fact that Sonny harboured these feelings at all suggests he was not the insensitive brute people have chosen to believe him to be.

His uneasy relationship with his father perhaps made it inevitable that sooner rather than later, Sonny, or Charles as he was then, would leave the sandy patch of land alongside the slow, swampy waters of eastern Arkansas where Tobe and Helen Liston raised their children for the best part of 30 years. Inevitably, as word spread of better-paid jobs available in the industrial cities, people began to migrate

towards them. And at some time in the mid-1940s, Charles Liston's sister Alcora took off north to St Louis. E.B.Ward told Liston's biographer, Nick Tosches, that Charles then went to live with E.B. and his family for about a year. They were sharecropping on a farm in Parkin, Arkansas. E.B. said Helen and another of her sons, Curtis, arrived and stayed for one harvest, then went on to St Louis, where by then Alcora had become Mrs Alcora Jones. It was not a complicated journey. Trains had been running between Parkin and St Louis since the 1850s.

In other words, it seemed that Sonny, perhaps because he was no longer able to get on with his father, was sent to live with his half-brother, or else took it upon himself to go and nobody stopped him. Only later did he go looking for his mother in St Louis. Given those circumstances, it is uncertain whether or not he went to St Louis out of convenience, because maybe he had outstayed his welcome with E.B., or simply felt like moving on, or because of some deeper adolescent need to remain closer to his mother for a while longer.

Public-record research shows that by 1946 Helen was living in Forrest City, first at 220 North Beach Street and then at 114 Union Street. Maybe she did not really know where she was going, except away from the farm and Tobe. By the following year she was in St Louis, working in a shoe factory. She did not appear to experience any guilt at going:

> There wasn't too much of a problem about the children getting taken care of. I didn't have but one little fellow that needed to be taken care of. He was six years old. The rest of them could make a day [day's work].

This suggests that the baby of the family, Wesley, was born around 1940, when Tobe was 70 and Helen 42. The 1940 census, which is likely to be released for public scrutiny from at the earliest 2012, should tell us more about when Sonny Liston was actually born, but my suspicion is that 1932 was not an unreasonable estimate.

And so the Liston family broke apart. Tobe remained on the farm with Sonny's brother, J.T., and both J.T. and Wesley stayed in the area after their father's death. Wesley eventually farmed nearby in Cherry Valley.

Sonny Liston's roots, even if he did not know or understand them, are of relevance when we come to consider what type of man he was. The effects of slavery only two generations back, his parents' move to Arkansas, the apparent failure or refusal of his father to show love, the decision of his mother to move away, and his choice to follow her to St Louis, all combine to give the sense of an emotional instability, and he might well have had a subconscious yearning to find security.

Perhaps he looked for it in the company of the hard men who drifted through the contemporary construction jobs he found in St Louis; perhaps he looked for it when he stood up to gang leaders in jail; and once free again, perhaps he sought it through what he thought would be an honest living in professional boxing. In the end, he did find a level of security through the loyalty and persistent support of his wife, Geraldine, and it seems entirely understandable that he found consolation and a kind of freedom in the company of children.

This was no ordinary man.