

## Reconstruction and the Rose Bowl

The War Between the States and the pillaging by General William Tecumseh Sherman's Union troops left the South devastated. Most properties as well as systems of production and transportation were destroyed. Livestock were slaughtered and crops burned. For most Southerners, survival became a matter of clawing and scraping.

The years of radical Reconstruction following the war further demoralized the South. The region was placed under military rule and an inept attempt was made to redistribute land and resources. But those in charge of Reconstruction didn't understand basic human nature. Nor did they realize, until it was too late, how easily their programs were being exploited and undermined by corrupt interlopers.

So, within a few years, this social experiment lost its momentum and was phased out, officially ending in 1877. At that point the South began rebuilding efforts but the struggle to regain some semblance of stability continued for decades. Indeed, millions of Black as well as White Southerners migrated to the North in the decades following the War because they were unable to earn a living in the South.

But one form of Reconstruction was simply replaced with another form that, for decades, kept Southern states in a continuous struggle against poverty. Historian A.B. Moore examined this phenomenon in his 1940s paper, "One Hundred Years of Reconstruction of the South." Moore describes the harsh measures the government imposed on the South following the War. The region was not allowed to collect debts it was owed; however it had to pay its debts in full. Discriminatory tariffs continued to place an unfair advantage on the South while filling Northern coffers. Freight-rates were skewed in favor of the North who could ship its goods southward at cheaper rates than the South could ship its goods to the North. Also, the inequitable rate structure allowed the North to ship its goods to Southern cities cheaper than Southern cities could ship goods to their own Southern neighbors.

Another inequity was the patent subsidy that allowed the North to own almost 90 percent of "the effective money-producing patents." Of the government pensions paid for the War Between the States and World War One, 7 billion dollars went to the North while only 1 billion dollars went to the other regions of the country. Southern companies and farmers were compelled to finance their ventures using Northern lenders and were charged much higher interest rates than those assessed Northern borrowers. It is estimated that the North controlled ninety percent of the nation's wealth primarily because of these government differentials that kept the South in "colonial bondage."

It has been said that, after the war, "tongues and pens" replaced "bullets and bayonets." The North owned the publishing businesses, agencies of public instruction, news gathering agencies, newspapers, magazines and radio systems. Northern conglomerates also owned most newspapers in the South. In Moore's words, "This gave the North a tremendous advantage in the shaping of public opinion." Media became the instrument used "to make the northern way of life the national way." The North had "the conviction that it was not a section but the whole United States and that, therefore, its pattern of life must prevail throughout the country. When the South failed to conform it was stigmatized as backward, provincial, and sectional." Southern culture was not simply different, it was boorish. Northern journalists described the South in increasingly unflattering ways although most had never traveled to the region.

By the early 1900s, the South had changed dramatically. It was moving away from an agrarian economy. Although poverty was still a problem, the South had a multiplicity of commercial

enterprises and metropolitan centers. Southern universities were incubating a group of writers who would profoundly impact American literature. And the Southern Belle had become a Flapper, influenced by the female need for independence that was sweeping the country. But the northern press continued to portray the South as a rural backwater that could not compete with the hardworking and industrialized North.

Not surprisingly, the immense power of the media was even influencing the way Southerners viewed themselves. So it is understandable that, in the 1920s, the South was a region devoid of regional pride. But, finally, an incident occurred that marked the beginning of a change in the South's image. Oddly enough, it was a football game: the 1926 Rose Bowl. This game pitted the University of Washington against the University of Alabama, the first Southern team in history to be invited to a bowl game. This contest would always be remembered as "The football game that changed the South."

It has been called the Rose Bowl's most spectacular game and many believe it was the most exciting college football game ever played. A few years ago the University of Alabama Center for Public Television & Radio produced a documentary on this celebrated game. Film footage from the University's archives contains events leading up to the game as well as scenes from the game and its aftermath. The archives also contained portions of interviews with some of the crusty old players who, with their Southern accents, recall events from the game as though they happened yesterday.

Football, America's version of soccer, had caught the nation's fancy in the late 1800s. In its beginning years, there were no stadiums, no marching bands or cheerleaders and students handled coaching and officiating. Anyone who wanted to watch the contest had to stand along the sidelines throughout the entire game.

But by 1900, the game had become so popular that astute college presidents realized that football could be a big money maker for their institutions. They implemented football programs, hired coaching staffs, built stadiums and formed marching bands

As early as 1869, the National Collegiate Athletic Association began awarding a national championship to the most deserving college team. The NCAA, as well as national sportswriters, didn't believe Southern teams could compete with other regions of the country. So, for its first 56 years, the NCAA only awarded its coveted national championship to two Southern teams, and one of these had to share the honor with a Northern team.

In 1902, the city of Pasadena added the Rose Bowl football game to its annual Tournament of Roses. The Rose Bowl was the college football event of the year and, until the mid 1930s, it was the only bowl game in the country. Prior to January 1, 1926, no Southern team had ever been invited to the prestigious Rose Bowl.

In the 1920s, many Ivy League as well as other colleges felt that football had become too popular and might interfere with academics. Some schools decided that the regular season games were enough and they would no longer accept Rose Bowl invitations. Coach Enoch Bagshaw's Washington team had won all its regular season games in 1925 but, because of a grudge with Southern California, it shunned the Rose Bowl.

So, reluctantly, the Rose Bowl committee decided to consider Southern teams. The University of Alabama had been undefeated in 1925. In fact it had only given up seven points during the entire season. Bowl officials extended an invitation to Alabama and it accepted without hesitation. At this point, Washington reversed its earlier decision and decided to accept the Rose Bowl's invitation.

There was widespread disappointment expressed over the committee's selection of Alabama. National sportswriters vented their peevish annoyance in their columns. Although most had never seen the Alabama team play, they predicted a lopsided victory for Washington and castigated bowl officials for their decision. One sportswriter picked Washington over Alabama by a margin of 51 points!

The 1925 Washington Huskies were indeed a football power. And its team had a physical advantage over Alabama with taller, more muscular players, many over 6 feet tall and averaging 190 pounds each. They were difficult to move against and Washington's burly halfback, George Wilson, could run roughshod over other teams, often dragging tacklers with him.

If Alabama had an advantage; it was its coach, Wallace Wade, probably the youngest and certainly the most underrated coach of that era. Wade had been an outstanding player for Brown University and had only been out of school for seven years, years spent as an assistant coach at Vanderbilt. Today, we can't imagine Brown University fielding a football team but, in the early 1900s, it did, along with Harvard, Yale and other Eastern colleges.

Alabama's Quarterback Pooley Hubert, a veteran of World War One, was 21 years old when he entered Alabama as a freshman. The largest and oldest team member; he took football very seriously and often played without a helmet. Halfback Johnny Mack Brown was definitely not a typical football player. His extra curricular activities included theater and he had acted in many campus plays. He was playful and fun loving and his handsome good looks made him popular with the coeds. Brown was the fastest man on the team and Coach Wade designed the game's first pair of low cut, lightweight football shoes to increase his speed

The 1926 Rose Bowl was eagerly anticipated all around the country and pregame publicity made the headlines of newspapers. Also, bowl game tension was heightened when the NCAA voted to wait until after the game to award its national championship for 1925. With the dour Calvin Coolidge in the White House, the nation craved some kind of excitement.

This was the first Rose Bowl to be broadcast on radio. But most families in America didn't own radios. So, throughout the South, theaters and public buildings had telegraph wires connected to their facilities so they could be rented to large groups who could follow the game on tickertape. Imagine this scenario if you can: an announcer would read play activity from tickertape and move a picture of a football across a large billboard marked off like a football gridiron. Southerners in the audience would actually cheer each time Alabama made a big play.

The Alabama team received a big send off at the Tuscaloosa train station and began its four-day trip to the West Coast. Most of the players were from small towns and Coach Wade was concerned that they would be too distracted by pregame events that included trips to various Hollywood studios and photo-ops with famous Hollywood film stars. After a couple of days of this hoopla, Wade confined his players to the hotel. From now on they would concentrate on football.

In the days preceding the game, northern sportswriters attended Alabama's practice sessions and got their first look at the team. Now, as they watched the Crimson Tide's scrimmages, they began to narrow the odds, worried that the game might not be as one-sided as they had once thought.

Finally the big day arrived and the Rose Bowl stadium was packed. There were basically three groups of spectators; Alabama fans, Washington fans, and, by far the largest group, Californians with no particular allegiance to either team. Sportswriters and journalists from all around the nation, including Damon Runyon and Grantland Rice, were at the Pasadena stadium to cover the game. Throughout the contest they continually relayed Teletype reports to their bureaus and nothing was too insignificant to mention.

Washington, relying mostly on its powerful halfback, George Wilson, dominated the first half, but was only able to score 12 points. The Crimson Tide was, to put it mildly, not playing inspired football. But late in the second quarter, Wilson became overzealous when tackling Johnny Mack Brown. He hurled Brown to the ground and then viciously twisted his leg. Apparently officials didn't see this infraction of the rules but the Bama squad did and they were enraged. Inadvertently, Wilson had motivated the Tide players far beyond what any coach's pep talk could have done.

It may have been a coincidence but, a few plays later, Wilson was knocked unconscious. However, during a time out Washington trainers revived him and he was able to continue playing – but not for long. Next, Wilson went down with a hip injury and had to be assisted off the field. This injury kept him out of the game for the entire third quarter. Now, the fired up Crimson Tide began moving the ball but the quarter ended before they could put any points on the board.

The first half of the game didn't satisfy anyone. Although Washington led by a score of twelve to nothing, its fans were not pleased. Neither were those sportswriters who had predicted that Washington would blow Alabama off the field. Alabama fans couldn't believe that their boys didn't score a single point in two quarters of play. And the Californians had to sit through a first half that would only appeal to defensive coaches.

It was a punishing first half because at that time the same players were required to play both offense and defense. These bedraggled young men made their way to their respective dressing rooms to rest and listen to any halftime adjustments their coaches might make. But Wallace Wade knew that the problem wasn't his game plan. He had only one comment for his players, "And they told me boys from the South would fight." With that he left the room.

We don't know what effect Wade's strange halftime behavior made on the players. However, it didn't seem to bother Johnny Mack Brown who left the dressing room and casually strolled into the stadium to socialize. The University's documentary has a wonderful shot of Johnny during halftime, sitting between two attractive Flappers, flashing his impish grin at the camera.

In the third quarter, Alabama decided to alter its game plan and improvise. In the opening series of downs, Quarterback Hubert called his own number 5 times in a row, running for 27 yards on his first carry. Four plays later he scrambled over the goal line for Alabama's first touchdown. The point after was good and Washington's lead was narrowed to 5 points.

After recovering a Washington fumble at midfield, the Crimson Tide took off again. This time Hubert flipped the ball to his other halfback, Grant Gillis, who promptly completed a 40-yard pass to Brown, who was finally brought down on Washington's 5-yard line. On the next play, Johnny Mack Brown scampered into the end zone for the touchdown. The point after put Alabama ahead by a score of 14 to 12.

The defensive unit held Washington and Alabama again took possession. Pooley Hubert had his Bama squad huddled on its own 39 yard line; 61 yards away from the Washington end zone. Years later Johnny Mack Brown recalled what happened on the next play. "Pooley told me to run upfield as fast as I could. When I reached the three-yard line, I looked back and the ball was coming over my shoulder. I took it in stride and went over carrying somebody. The place was really in an uproar." The point after attempt failed but the Crimson Tide was ahead by 8 points. In the first seven minutes of the third quarter, Alabama had scored three times to take a 20 to 12 lead.

Alabama fans were giddy. They hooted and hollered. Washington fans were as still and silent as the figures on Mount Rushmore. Also, they were extremely perturbed at the Californians who were now cheering for the boys from the South.

But Coach Wade was not smiling. He knew there was another quarter left to play and an eight-point lead was not enough against a powerhouse like Washington. In the fourth quarter George Wilson returned to the game. Alabama drove the ball to the Huskies' 12-yard line. But Washington stopped the Tide on a fourth and one play. Then the Huskies started to move with Wilson picking up 17 yards on first down. A few plays later Wilson caught a short pass for a crucial first down and then threw a 27-yard touchdown pass to quarterback George Guttormsen. The point after cut Alabama's lead to one point.

Football is called a contact sport and there was a surplus of contact in the remaining minutes of this epic game. In fact, the fourth quarter of the 1926 Rose Bowl might rank as one of the most brutally physical quarters in football history. These young athletes had played three and a half quarters of backbreaking football. But neither side could allow the other to score. There was simply too much at stake. Old timers, remembering the game, claim that in the minutes remaining, no spectators were seated. Everyone was standing perfectly still and watching in total silence. It was so quiet, they said, that even in the top rows of the stadium, you could actually hear the blocking and tackling, the slapping of leather and the groans of the players.

The grueling minutes seemed to drag by. The Bama squad knew that in the time remaining Washington would rely on its best player, George Wilson, hoping he could make the big play. The outcome of the game depended on Alabama's ability to contain the brawny halfback. But even though Alabama players swarmed him on every play, Wilson eventually managed to struggle free and break loose into the open field headed for the end zone.

Many consider what happened next to be the biggest play of the game and it was certainly the most spectacular. As Washington fans watched in astonishment, Johnny Mack Brown caught up with Wilson and made an open-field tackle that put Washington's strapping halfback on the ground. Alabama had risen to the occasion and it would not let Wilson break loose again.

As the final minute ticked away, Washington tried one last desperation pass. Alabama intercepted it, time ran out and the final whistle blew. The underdogs from Alabama had upset the Washington Huskies and won the 1926 Rose Bowl by a score of 20 to 19. And, in the process, they captured the NCAA's coveted national championship for 1925.

Alabama fans were delirious and emotionally drained. The Californians were whooping it up. They had seen one hell of a football game. Washington's coach left the field in a huff, refusing to congratulate Wallace Wade.

In cities throughout the South, streets were mobbed with celebrating fans. Bars and lounges did a brisk business and police made no attempt to restore order. It was a long overdue celebration. For a while at least, Gettysburg and Appomattox were forgotten.

The long trip home was made even longer because the train had to make frequent stops at towns throughout the South. As brass bands played, the team would assemble on station platforms to be cheered by local citizens waving red and white bunting. Finally the train arrived at the Tuscaloosa station and the players were greeted by thousands of fans who had been waiting for hours. The Mayor proclaimed the day as an official holiday and schools and businesses were closed.

Two players in this legendary game were actually signed to Hollywood contracts and had long film careers: Washington's Herman Brix and Alabama's Johnny Mack Brown. Herman Brix, primarily because of his physique, began by playing Tarzan. His name was eventually changed to Bruce Bennett and he played several important roles over the years including parts in at least two Academy Award winning films, "Mildred Pierce" and "The Treasure of the Sierra Madre."

Johnny Mack Brown appeared with many of the famous actresses of the time including Greta Garbo, Jean Harlow and Joan Crawford. He also made comedies with Mae West. In 1930, MGM gave Brown the lead role in "Billy The Kid" with Wallace Beery as Sheriff Pat Garrett. This led to years of Westerns and Brown became one of Hollywood's top cowboy stars.

But the outcome of one high-profile football game could not transform the nation's conduct toward the South. The inequitable government policies continued to restrain the South's economy and the northern press persisted in its ridicule of Southerners. However, for discerning northerners, the 1926 Rose Bowl raised a troubling question: If reporters had so completely misjudged Southern football teams, shouldn't their other reports about the South be suspect? And Southerners certainly began to wonder why they were allowing another region of the country to sit in judgment of their culture.

Andrew Doyle, a history professor at Winthrop University said of the game: "You can look at the 1926 Rose Bowl as the most significant event in Southern football history. What had come before was almost like a buildup, a preparation for this grand coming out party. And it was a sublime tonic for Southerners who were buffeted by a legacy of defeat, military defeat, a legacy of poverty, and a legacy of isolation from the American political and cultural mainstream."

When professors catalogue history-altering events, they usually refer to political upheavals, military campaigns, scientific discoveries and new inventions. But the impact of other cultural phenomena should not be discounted. This famous game should be a discussion topic in textbooks and Southern history classes. The 1926 Rose Bowl was at least a spark, the genesis of a new regional pride for the South, and it marked the beginning of the end of the South's exclusion from the rest of the nation.