

PREFACE

On the trail of another man, the biographer must put up with finding himself at every turn: any biography uneasily shelters an autobiography within it.

—Paul Murray Kendall

Tolstoy said all happy families resemble one another; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way. This also can apply to family businesses, and if you're thinking of working in the family business, think twice. Those of you who are may already know why.

This is the story of an SOB in a family-owned enterprise. Not my father. Me, the *Son of the Boss*. It's also told by another son who worked closest to Roy Hampton Park—John B. Babcock, the son of the man who gave my father his first big break. With the exception of my mother, no one knew more about my father on a personal and social level and in a one-on-one working relationship than Johnnie Babcock and me. Both of us being sons of self-made men, we think it represents thousands of others living or working in the shadows of powerful fathers.

For Babcock, it was stressful to be second-in-command to a *Forbes 400* workaholic for almost two decades and to meet the high expectations demanded. As he points out, *his own* father enjoyed significant fame—but Johnnie never worked for him. He worked for my father—and lived a personal version of “the strenuous life.”

For me, as the son of a self-made entrepreneur, I learned you can survive reasonably well if you maintain your independence. It's another scenario when you become an SOB. I had a normal

childhood, a good education, and a strong and respectable independent advertising career going when I decided to accept my father's invitation to work for him. That's when the going really got tough.

In 1942, Johnnie's father, H.E. Babcock, an entrepreneur who founded the largest farm cooperative in the nation hired my father. My father, in turn, hired Johnnie to work for him for a few years in the late 1940's, and later to rejoin him in 1964.

When I left the advertising agency business to come to work for my father in 1971, I reported to Johnnie. Neither of us could have fully anticipated what “life with father” would be like. As his longest-lasting employee, after working for him for 19 years, Johnnie resigned in 1988. I lasted 17 years working in his communications businesses before buying the outdoor divisions I had been hired to run, and brought Johnnie back then as a director of Park Outdoor.

What it's like to be the offspring of self-made entrepreneurs may be familiar to sons and daughters of driven fathers whether they work for them or not. After finishing the first draft of this book, reading it for the first time, I suddenly realized what being a Son of the Boss really means. It means the possibility of massive war with your family, and I had to go to war twice. It was the only way I was able to keep the company I run, create the foundation we have, and be in a position to write this book.

What I saw of my father as I grew up paled in comparison to the insights I acquired while working for him. Combined with Johnnie's view from the top, we think it's a story worth telling. It may even provide comfort for other SOBs or DOBs.

INTRODUCTION IN THE BEGINNING

*They're tearing down the street where I grew up,
Like pouring brandy in a Dixie cup.
They're paving concrete on a part of me,
No trial for killing off a memory.
Ashes to ashes, dust to dust
Can you find the Milky Way?
Long Tall Sally and Tin Pan Alley
Have seen their dying day.
Ashes to ashes, dust to dust
It'll never be the same.
But we're all forgiving,
We're only living,
To leave the way we came.*

—From the song “Ashes to Ashes”
by Dennis Lambert and Brian Potter¹

I first heard these words in the song from *The Fifth Dimension* in 1973. As far as I know, all the places where I lived growing up in Raleigh, Ithaca, Lawrenceville, Chapel Hill, Queens, Port Chester and Charlotte are still there. All except one. Possibly the house I rented for a year in Perrine, Florida, may have been destroyed by hurricane Hugo. But SW 184th Terrace is still there.

But now in my later years, I feel the concrete of my past beginning to pave over me, and there's much to remember. Some of those memories may or may not be of value to others. But they are of value to me.

So while I can, I remember.

There are many misconceptions about my father, wrong rumors I hear to this day. So I felt the need for a son's account, neither a tribute nor a condemnation, to set the record straight. He was a great man, though frequently hurtful to me, and it was instructive to take a journey down the hard road he took to build an estate worth close to a billion dollars—and realize his version of the American dream.

That dream probably didn't include being ranked in the top 140 of the *Forbes 400* richest Americans in 1993 when he died. Pretty good for someone who came off a farm to put himself through college, and whose first full-time job after graduation paid \$100 a month.

Though not particularly notable in today's terms, back in 1993, only 15 percent of the *Forbes 400* were billionaires, compared to some 88 percent in 2005. Ten years later the price of admission was well over \$1.5 billion, and to even be included in the *Forbes 400* in 2024 you needed \$3.3 billion. But for my father, building \$1 billion in 62 years from his starting salary in 1931 of \$100 a month is not insignificant. And neither is a billion. A billion minutes ago, the Roman Empire ruled, a billion hours ago our ancestors were in the Stone Age, and a billion days ago, nothing walking the earth had human dreams. Like a father, or a son.

“Any biography uneasily shelters an autobiography within it,” Paul Kendall said, and shortly after I started writing this book about my father, I realized it was going to include a lot about me and his closest business associate, Johnnie Babcock. Because that was the only way my father's story, with the knowledge and anecdotes we bring to it, can be told.

My father didn't make his fortune through computer genius, promotion or ascension in a company, performance bonuses, family inheritance, technology or invention, gambling, market manipulation, entertainment, energy, the stock market or options, or through a dot.com. Instead he made it the slow, hard way, doggedly passing through four careers to achieve success. He

started as a writer, editor and publisher, moved on to advertising and public relations, then into food marketing and franchising, and finally into broadcasting media which expanded into print through newspaper publishing, taking him full circle to his beginnings.

In an article in the fall 1979 issue of *Wachovia Magazine* Catherine Walker observed that he possessed “a special blend of talents including business acumen, a keen perception of ideas that sell, a razor-sharp memory and the persistence and drive to make it all work. In short, he is an entrepreneur of the first order and of the old school—an all too rare individual in American business today.”

My father was an avid researcher, as am I. There were hundreds of articles written about him during his various careers, and as a journalist, and his son, I have read them all to sort out the truth. I have interviewed his remaining associates, and the research has been not only exhaustive, but exhausting. “It has been said that writing comes more easily if you have something to say,” according to novelist Sholem Asch, and I hope I do. And to get to the truth and assemble the facts has been a long, time-consuming ordeal.

Oscar Wilde said, “Every great man has his disciples—and it is always Judas who writes the biography.” I am no Judas, but I will tell the truth about my father, even when it is painful, and praise him when praise is due.

It was not an easy task being the son of an entrepreneurial father like mine, but I managed to survive in his shadow, absorb the best lessons to be learned from the way he ran a business and directed his life, and reject the worst. I have also learned from my own experience running a business that you can still accomplish your goals by trusting your associates and employees.

In the process I learned what it should be like to be a father to your children, and although I, too, was a workaholic while my kids were growing up, I tried to take time when I could, mostly later in life, to let them know I loved them, that I cared. I have also tried hard to avoid making the same mistakes my father made with me.

My father was manipulative and controlling and he knew

how to use charm to his advantage, but there was good mixed in with the bad in our relationship, and I have come away awed by my new discoveries about this straight-out-of-Horatio-Alger self-made man. The bottom line was always important to him. My bottom line is that I respect him more in death than I did in life.

Life is short, and I wish I could bring him back to tell him, for the first time, how much I miss him. But I can’t, and though there was a time for many years when I thought we might not be meeting in the hereafter, I now feel that we will be together in the same place, at some time, again.

It is said that every man has a story, and it is through that story that we can live on. If the story may also be worth something to others, then that is the premise and the promise of this book.



My father in 1915. Earnest and determined even at the tender age of five.

CHAPTER 1

HEARSAY AND HISTORY

I want to know what it says, the sea. What it is that it keeps on saying.

—Charles Dickens, *Dombey and Son* (1848)

To quote J.D. Salinger's narrator, Holden Caulfield, in the famous opening statement of the 1951 coming-of-age classic, *The Catcher in the Rye*, "If you really want to hear about it, the first thing you'll probably want to know is where I was born, what my lousy childhood was like, and how my parents were occupied and all before they had me, and all that David Copperfield kind of crap," and here Caulfield's quote ends with, "but I don't feel like going into it, if you want to know the truth."

Well, I feel like going into it. And I differ from Caulfield in that my childhood wasn't lousy; it was what came later that was. I started dictating my memories of my family relationship at the turn of the century in the summer of 2000 while on vacation on the Gulf of Mexico in Boca Grande, FL. I wasn't then, and still am not, into computers. Although everyone who works with me is computer literate from iPhones to mainframes, I still use a voice recorder for dictation. I feel that thoughts can be transmitted quicker through voice than through fingers on a keyboard. So, I continued dictating later the same year from the edge of the Atlantic Ocean in Pine Knoll Shores, N.C. Those vast, sighing, giving and taking seas that command almost three-fourths of our planet seemed to call to me and demand introspection, and once started, I found it hard to stop.

I was born on July 23, the beginning of Leo, in Rex Hospital in Raleigh to North Carolina parents in the Chinese Zodiac Year of the Tiger, 1938. As a Republican, as was my father before me, I find it ironic that the house that was my home for the first years of my life has become the Democratic headquarters in Raleigh. I don't remember much about the early years I lived in Raleigh. My memories really begin at age four, when my entire family moved to Ithaca, NY.

When I say the entire family, this included my father, my mother, my mother's mother, and my mother's grandmother. After my father and mother were married, he moved into her house. It was the middle of the Great Depression and times were tough enough to make ends meet for him to live in a house with his mother-in-law and grandmother-in-law, along with his wife. So I guess turnabout was fair play when he brought all of them with him when he moved to Ithaca.

After a short stay at the Ithaca Hotel, we crammed ourselves into a three-bedroom apartment in Belleayre, a building near Cornell University. My sister was not yet born, and I shared one of the bedrooms with "Muddie," my great-grandmother. (She was a dear soul, but the main thing that I remember about her was that she snored.)

BEFORE MY TIME

Where I was born and where and how I have lived is unimportant. It is what I have done with where I have been that should be of interest.

—Georgia O'Keeffe

My father was born in Dobson, North Carolina, on September 15, 1910. The youngest of four children and the second son of Laura Frances (Stone) and I. Arthur Park, Roy H. Park started life on a prosperous farm in Surry County near the Virginia border

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