

Ralph Hay: A Forgotten Pioneer

An Interview with Dr. James F. King

By Chris Willis

Most of the names associated with the early years of the National Football League are easy to remember. Names that are synonymous with the game of pro football: Halas, Thorpe, Grange, Carr, Mara, and Lambeau. These are the pioneers of the NFL. But one name gets overlooked, the name of Hay. Ralph E. Hay was the man who put together the league's first organizational meeting in Canton, Ohio on September 17, 1920 in his automobile showroom. Everyone knows how the owners sat around on running boards to help establish the American Professional Football Association, and then in 1922 changed the name to the National Football League.

This fall the NFL will kickoff its 85th straight year of action, currently as the country's number one spectator sport. But who knows what would've happened if Ralph Hay didn't call that first meeting together to form the NFL. Maybe the future of pro football would be on a different course than it is now. Some credit is due Mr. Ralph Hay. I sat down with Dr. James F. King, the grandson of Ralph Hay, on June 1, 2003 to discuss the career of his forgotten grandfather.

Ralph E. Hay was born in Canton, Ohio on January 12, 1891. "Ralph had a physical profile much like mine," King recalls his grandfather. "Average height and weight, with a hairline much like mine, bald. He was considered to be live wire. Very active. He was a great dresser, he always had nice suits and nice dress shoes to match. I always remember him smoking a cigar too. If you see photos of him, he usually has a cigar with him."

After high school the 18-year old Hay went to work as an automobile salesman for a local dealership. After several years selling cars, Hay went into the car business for himself. "He set up Ralph E. Hay Motor Company, and sold Jordan Hupmobiles and Pierce-Arrows. Hay became one of the most successful automobile dealers in the state of Ohio."

In 1918, to help promote his car business- and pursue his love of football- Hay bought the Canton Bulldogs from the previous owner, Jack Cusack. "My grandfather bought the team from Jack Cusack, the man who brought Jim Thorpe to Canton." King said. "But Cusack was going to Oklahoma to go into the oil business so he sold the Bulldogs to Ralph." So at the young age of 27, Hay became the owner of the best professional football team in the country. The Bulldogs didn't operate in 1918 due to World War I, but they came back in 1919 to have an undefeated season (9-0-1). The 1919 Bulldogs outscored their opponents 195 to 20 in ten games, with six of those games won by shutouts. The Bulldogs claimed the U.S. Professional Football Championship.

After the season Hay started thinking about how desperately professional football needed an organized league. Although the Bulldogs claimed the world championship, it was just a paper championship, since there was no true football league for professional football. On August 20, 1920 he met with owners from three Ohio franchises; Frank Neid and Art Ranney of Akron, Jimmy O'Donnell, who brought his star player Stanley Cofall, of Cleveland, and Carl Storck of Dayton met to form the beginnings of a new league, the Ohio owners named their league the American Professional Football Conference (APFC).

According to the *Canton Evening Repository* (August 21, 1920), Hay was chosen as the secretary of the new league. Also at this time, Hay received a few letters from professional teams outside of Ohio interested in playing the Bulldogs. So, Hay was then given the responsibility of contacting the best pro teams east of the Mississippi to form a true professional football league. Included in that group of letters was one sent to George Halas of the Decatur (IL) Staleys. The "Papa Bear" and several other owners agreed to come to Canton. That meeting was set for September.

Then on September 17th the NFL's first historical meeting took place right in Hay's automobile dealership in downtown Canton. "The meeting was set up for September 17th at about 8:00 pm. Ralph was to host the meeting in his office, but because there were too many people they held the meeting in the showroom. Most of the owners, including George Halas, Art Ranney, Leo Lyons, and Jim Thorpe, sat on the running boards of the cars." King said. "Also there, was my great-uncle Lester Higgins. Lester worked at the Citizens Bank in Canton and was Secretary-Treasurer of the Bulldogs from 1919 to 1923. George Halas who passed away in 1983 and Lester who passed away in 1981 were the final two living members of the NFL's first meeting."

During the meeting the owners decided to call the league, the American Professional Football Association (APFA), instead of the A.P.F.C. The ten original franchises were from four states- Akron, Canton, Cleveland, and Dayton from Ohio; Hammond and Muncie from Indiana; Rochester from New York; and Rock Island, Decatur, and Racine from Illinois. Four other franchises in Buffalo, New York; Chicago, Illinois; Columbus, Ohio; and Detroit, Michigan joined later that year. Also during the September meeting the owners selected league officials. Ralph Hay was offered the job of league president but turned it down. "Ralph was selfless," King said. "He was offered the job but he demurred to Jim Thorpe, because he thought Thorpe's name would give the league more prestige. As it turned out Thorpe lasted only one year and then Joe Carr took over. Thorpe wasn't very good at the administrative part of football. Ralph could've been the first president, but he was looking out for the league, he thought of the league first."

In 1922 the APFA changed its name to the National Football League. After two lackluster seasons of going 7-4-2 and 5-2-3, the Bulldogs put together back-to-back NFL Championship seasons. The 1922 Canton Bulldogs finished with a record of 10-0-2, behind the play of three future Hall of Famers- Guy Chamberlin, Pete "Fats" Henry, and Link Lyman. The Bulldogs outscored their opponents 184-15, including 9 defensive shutouts in the 12 games. Ralph Hay and the city of Canton could now claim a true "World Championship."

After winning the NFL Championship in 1922 the strain of running a pro football team took its toll on Hay. He lost a lot of money- using mostly funds from his car business- and eventually sold the team to several Canton business men before the start of the 1923 season. Hay wrote a letter to the team and the fans of the Bulldogs thanking them for the last couple of seasons. The letter appeared in all of the 1923 Bulldog game programs and said:

"The height of my ambition in the first five years that I handled the Canton Bulldogs Professional Football Team was accomplished by winning the 1922 World's Championship.

The assistance of my organization, the loyal support of the Canton fans and the wonderful harmony that Coach Chamberlin brought into the heart of every player who was with this team in 1922 was the fundamental reason for our success.

I, therefore, wish every member of the new organization worlds of success and trust that in 1923 they will retain the World's Championship Pennant of the National Football League, I am, Always for the Bulldogs, Ralph E. Hay."

The 1923 Bulldogs took those words to heart, and went out and won their second straight NFL title. Not only did they post an 11-0-1 record, the Bulldogs outscored their opponents 246 points to 19. To show how dominate they were, the Bulldogs gave up only one touchdown in 12 league games- Cleveland Indians fullback Johnny Kyle's touchdown run on November 25th was the only six-pointer allowed. The Bulldogs became the first NFL team to win back-to-back world titles.

After the end of the 1926 season the Canton Bulldogs disbanded for good. The NFL was moving to bigger cities and small towns, like Canton, just couldn't support a professional team. Ralph Hay continued to live in Canton and became good friends with Jim Thorpe. "My grandfather was very close to Jim Thorpe during the time Thorpe played with the Canton Bulldogs," King recalls his grandfather's relationship with Thorpe. "That relationship continued even after Thorpe stop playing. When Thorpe was having some tough times later in life, he continued to be friends with my grandfather. Thorpe would

always visit us in Canton or Louisville when we lived there. I was very young when Thorpe came to visit, but I do have a prize photograph of Thorpe holding me in his arms when I was about 4 or 5 years old. Also, I was named after Jim Thorpe. Thorpe was named James Francis Thorpe. I was named by my parents as James Francis King. So it was a special relationship.”

On April 27, 1961 the city of Canton was selected by the NFL as the site for the Pro Football Hall of Fame. The efforts of Ralph Hay and the Canton Bulldogs were given as part of the historical proof for the shrine to be located in Canton. Despite the fact that Hay is not enshrined in the Hall of Fame the family has been honored by the city of Canton. “The family has been a little disappointed that Ralph hasn’t made the Hall of Fame.” King said. “But in October of 1983, the city of Canton put up a plaque on the old site where Ralph Hay’s automobile showroom once stood. The plaque is on the Bow Federal building in downtown Canton. The building is at the corner of 2nd Street and Cleveland, where the site of the NFL’s first organizational meeting took place. The plaque recognizes Ralph Hay and Jim Thorpe, and that historical meeting on September 17, 1920. That was very nice of the city. The family was very appreciative of that. Ralph Hay had a vision that professional football would be as big as major league baseball. I don’t think too many people believed him, but it happen. He had that vision.”

Final Notes:

Ralph Hay died on July 29, 1944, at the age of 53, from valvular heart disease, evolving from an earlier bout with rheumatic fever.

Dr. James F. King received his bachelor’s degree from the University of Notre Dame in 1957 and his doctorate of medicine from Saint Louis University School of Medicine in 1961. After serving in the U.S. Navy, King returned to Ohio in 1969 to practice medicine. For over forty years he has practice medicine, currently he is a gastroenterologist in Canton, Ohio. He has been praised as one of the best physicians, gastroenterologists, and gastrointestinal endoscopists in America. King and his wife Charlene currently reside in Canton, Ohio.
