

# Deaths on the Diamond: Baseball and Death in Iowa

By Bill Nowlin

To a Greater Bostonian, the low and gently rolling hills of eastern Iowa are soothing and a little reminiscent of home. In 2001, I found myself driving to exotic-sounding towns like Lisbon and Wyoming, chasing down a story that seemed too good to have lain untold for a half a century. It was a story of sadness, though, and one I approached gingerly.

It all began while I was working on a book about Boston Red Sox ballplayer Johnny Pesky. Pesky played major league baseball from 1942 through 1954 and I was making my way methodically through microfilm, reading every account of every game and checking every box score to follow his career day by day, and to look for interesting anecdotes to liven up his biography.

One evening, in the pages of the *Boston Globe*, I noticed a small item from the Associated Press in the May 4, 1949 edition, with a headline that leapt off the sports page at me: **SECOND BOY KILLED BY SAME PITCHER**. It ran 6 brief paragraphs—a short article, datelined Wyoming, Iowa, which told the tale of a high school senior named Clifford Dirks who had killed two fellow ballplayers within one year while playing local baseball.

I do a lot of reading and writing about baseball, but I'd never heard of anything like this. I knew that a Carl Mays pitch had killed Ray Chapman in August, 1920—the only time a major league ballplayer has been killed during a baseball game. I knew that each year there are accidental deaths which occur in one sport or another. But to read that the same Iowa pitcher had killed two fellow teenagers within an 8 month period seemed unbelievable. Once would be a tragedy, both for the family of the boy who was killed and for the boy who brought about the fatality, however innocently and inadvertently. To have killed two different ballplayers was not just tragedy; it was cataclysmic and catastrophic. Clifford Dirks must have been traumatized for life, I figured.

That evening, when I got home, I immediately did a People Finder search on the Internet. I looked up Dirks, to see if anyone by that name still resided in Iowa. Yes! Clifford Dirks, in fact, and in the same town: Wyoming, Iowa. Was this the same Dirks, or maybe his son? The young ballplayer was 17 at the time of the accident; he'd be 67 or 68 now. It could well be the same Clifford Dirks.

It was late 2000 when I first came across the story. The second death had been on May 3, 1949—the 50th anniversary had passed just a year earlier. Surely there must have been a number of stories written on the half-century anniversary.

I knew I had to call and inquire, but I was afraid to. I worried I'd bring up very bad memories should it be the same boy (now an older man.) He'd probably endured yet another round of publicity just the year before and was no doubt glad that the anniversary had passed and the controversy had subsided yet again. Here I might be, tearing a scab off a wound which had likely very nearly healed again. I didn't like the feeling, anticipating bringing fresh discomfort to the man. This could have been devastating for the youngster. Maybe the phone listing was for his son, or a cousin, and the original Dirks had gone insane years ago. I knew I wanted to be sensitive should I reach Mr. Dirks, and should he be the author of the unfortunate events.

It took me a few days to marshal the courage; it helped to write out a bit of a script and some notes so I could be as sensitive as possible. "He might not like to be reminded of this!!!" I wrote. "Try to be understanding." The clipping had said he wanted to quit after the first incident and that he went into seclusion after the second. What was I getting into here?

Finally, with a great deal of trepidation, I called. Yes, indeed, it was the same Clifford Dirks. He didn't seem that surprised to hear from me, but—remarkably—he told me there had been no new round of stories in 1999. In fact, he said that I was the first person who had called him since 1949! He answered all of my questions quite matter-of-factly, straightforward and without any unusual emotions. Surprisingly, he seemed to have suffered no damage at all.

Next I asked my People Finder to search for surnames of the boys who were killed: Rhoads and Latore. Both surnames turned up, and both in the towns the boys had lived. There was a Lee Rhoads in Lisbon. Could this really be a relative of Glen Rhoads, maybe even the man who lost a son over 50 years earlier? I phoned, and an old man answered but he seemed impatient and loudly let me know he didn't want to talk. I felt that I'd struck a nerve this time, reminding an old, old man of the sort of loss we all hope we never have to face. I felt really bad. But I wasn't sure I was ready to give up yet.

There were a couple of Latares in Oxford Junction (the A.P. dispatch misspelled the name as Latore.) I called one of the numbers and reached Melvin Latore's wife Sharon. "Yes, Melvin was Norman's brother." She suggested a time for me to call back. I did, and had a pleasant conversation with Melvin.

I'd meanwhile tried to reach out to the nearest sizable newspaper, the *Cedar Rapids Gazette*, and to local historical societies, hoping to learn more about the fate of the families following the tragic year. Word reached Lisbon High School and Mary Martin contacted me; she was Glen's sister. We also talked for a while on the phone. Among other things, I learned that it wasn't that her father Lee was so upset. It was that he was 100 years old and hard of hearing; frustrated, he'd cut the connection. Nothing personal.

I'd reached not only Cliff Dirks, but also relatives of the boys who had been killed—the father of one, a sister and one of two brothers (and Melvin told me that his brother Merlin lived nearby.) I was tempted with the idea of visiting the area. From Wyoming to Oxford Junction was only 7 miles; from Wyoming to Lisbon just 33 miles. All three communities were fairly close together and were competing schools back in the late 1940s. I hadn't been to Iowa since my own family drove cross-country in the late 1950s or very early 1960s when the interstate was a two-lane highway and I took the wheel—the first time I'd ever driven a car.

It could be a bit of an adventure, traveling to eastern Iowa from the East Coast, but there was still a concern that it could seem a ghoulish one. I was contemplating nosing around matters that had perhaps healed years ago. I worried about overstepping the bounds of propriety in my curiosity. I surmised how I might have felt had my brother, or son, been killed years ago and then a stranger arrived and started asking questions. What I didn't take into account adequately enough was the resilience, the acceptance and the matter-of-factness with which these Iowans dealt with their loss half a century ago. After three days in the area, I left immensely impressed.

First up was Mary Martin. Before visiting her, I spent a few hours in Cole Library at Cornell College in nearby Mount Vernon going through microfilm. I wanted to read how the local newspapers had covered the events, so I read through the *Mount Vernon Hawkeye-Record*. The May 5 edition had the story featured in the upper right hand corner – the space customarily reserved for a newspaper lead story. It was a single-column account headlined "**Lisbon Senior Fatally Hurt in Ball Game.**" It provided details, and then in the seventh paragraph commented, "Sympathy also goes to the pitcher Clifford Dirks. He had the misfortune to hit an Oxford Junction player Norman Latore [sic] with a pitched ball last fall. The lad died the next day. Dirks was reported in seclusion at his home." The story immediately continued by noting that Glen Rhoads, who had remained conscious for hours after the impact of the ball on the back of his head, told his parents that "it was just an accident and he had no feeling against the pitcher." Mr. and Mrs. Rhoads wrote Clifford "telling him what Glen said and that they are sure Glen would want him to finish his senior year and would not want this accident to bother him."

What was remarkable, though, was that there was virtually no follow-up in the local papers, nor in the *Cedar Rapids Gazette*. A separate story said that Lisbon would play Solon three days later and that those players who needed a ride should meet at the Dinner Den Cafe at 12:45 p.m. on Sunday. "Let's have a good following at these games and help the team get a good start," the story concluded. Life carried on. I searched in vain for any ongoing coverage. Had a high school pitcher killed two boys within the course of one academic year in 1999, instead of 1949, one can be certain that the streets of Wyoming would

have had at least 3 or 4 television trucks parked outside the Dirks home, and anchors visiting the Rhoads and Latare households, interviewing teammates, school teachers and concerned citizens for at least a few days. They also might have done serious psychological harm to Clifford Dirks in the process.

I drove to Lisbon and visited Mary Martin and her husband Jack at their home on West South Street. I was invited in and we sat around a table in the back and talked. She filled me in on Glen's story and made me feel welcome. A couple of days later, Mary and Jack took me out to dinner at a restaurant in the Amana Colonies. It seemed very familiar; I'm pretty sure our family ate there in the 1960s. On the way home, we passed by Bill Zuber's Restaurant—and we all realized that's where we should have gone, Zuber having been not only a major league ballplayer, but one who played for my hometown Red Sox at the end of his career. Next time, I hope it'll still be there.

Later we visited Mary's (and Glen's) father Lee. He was alert and agile—and 100 years old. Visiting, too, was Elva Lee Powers, another one of Mr. Rhoads' daughters. After a while, we all drove out to the cemetery where Glen was buried and visited the grave. That evening I was able to catch a game played by the Cedar Rapids Kernels in a beautiful old ballpark that I was sorry to learn was slated to be replaced.

### **Norman Latare**

It was the next day that I visited Oxford Junction. I arrived too early, so I drove by the town ballfield and took a few photographs. Then I drove back to Wyoming and visited the Wyoming Public Library and read the newspapers there. At last, I retraced the drive back to Oxford Junction and phoned Melvin Latare's house. Greeted by his wife, and then Melvin, we went downstairs to the den and were soon joined by Norman's other brother Merlin. They filled me in on the story from their perspective.

Norman Latare had been the first boy to die. He played for the Oxford Junction Pirates, the high school team. This was a town of around 700 people in 1948. The average high school class was 20 or so. "This has been a baseball community for years," noted Merlin. "We always had touring teams. After you got out of high school, that was what you wanted to do—play on the touring teams. Some of the guys went to college and went on to be coaches, on the college ball teams. This has been a baseball community from way back when. Norman ate that stuff up. He was a baseball nut. He knew all that stuff about batting averages—all the big league stuff. He lived and ate and slept baseball."

He never played ball until the eighth grade, though. "We never had no ball out there in the country," said Merlin. The Latares lived on a farm north of town. Jens and Frieda Latare had three boys and one girl, and they did "general farming—milk cows, stock cows. Some chickens. Hogs. Corn and oats and

hay. 280 acres. Back in those days, that was a pretty good one. Had about twelve milk cows. Milked by hand." Melvin was at Treasure Island, San Francisco in 1948, with the Navy. That summer, Merlin recalls, "we was out on the farm putting in a water pressure system. We never had running water in the house and it was getting time to be picking corn. Norman would quit and go to the ballgame in the afternoon. My dad had bought an older Chevy—a '42 or '43 Chevy that they drove to school." Norman had just started his senior year; he was due to turn 17 on October 24. The class picture was going to be taken in a couple of weeks and they'd dropped his new suit off at the dry cleaners. It was a rainy, overcast day on Tuesday, September 21. Norman drove over to Wyoming for the game; he was the left fielder for the Pirates. Wyoming and Oxford Junction were battling for the Wapsie Eight Conference title, a regional championship.

One of Cliff Dirks's teammates on the Wyoming team told me, "I don't want you to get the wrong idea when I say this, but on the basketball floor or on a baseball field, we were deadly enemies with Oxford Junction. A big rivalry. And yet the minute the game was over, hey, best of friends."

Norman was about 5'10", 140 pounds. He already had one of only three hits off Wyoming pitcher Dirks. "Late in the game," the Oxford Mirror wrote, "Norman came to bat again. The field was muddy and it was getting dark. As Dirks delivered the ball he slipped on the muddy ground. Norman slipped as he tried to dodge, and the ball struck his left temple." Dirks agrees that the weather played a role. "It was real slippery that day," he recalled more than fifty years later. "We shouldn't have even been playing. He just slipped into it and.....it happened, that's all. It was hard to pitch inside after that."

None of the local newspapers reported the final score of the Wyoming/Oxford Junction game, even though it was two days later that the gravity of the beaming was understood. Presumably, a pinch runner took Norman's place on first base after Norman was hit by the ball. No one interviewed even recalls which team won the game, though Fred Fifield remembers the bases as loaded at the time, and that he scored when Norman was hit. Norman Latare got a run batted in on his final at bat.

No one realized how serious the injury was. Don Dusanek was shortstop for the Wyoming team on both occasions. He noted that the field in Wyoming in those days was right down behind Cliff's house. "It wasn't a hard pitch," he recalls. "His foot slipped off the rubber while he was in the motion and it just kind of lobbed into home plate. The kid froze. It hit him in the temple, but did not knock him down. He didn't even stagger. But their coach did take him out."

After the game, Norman drove himself home to the farm, and ate supper with the family. He told them he had gotten hit. After the meal, he said, "You know, I've got a headache. I'm going to bed." The next day, he stayed home

from school. The doctor called and checked him over. It was a concussion, he told Norman's mother, but he'll be all right. When Norman's mother went to check on him on Thursday morning, she could tell he wasn't right and sent for the doctor, but by the time the doctor arrived, Norman was gone.

Don Dusanek reports, "Cliff went down to see him Thursday morning before school and as he was driving into the yard, they were carrying him out. He had died during the night."

Norman was a very popular boy and when the news hit the school on Thursday morning, the local paper wrote, "every boy and girl in high school was in tears...and Superintendent Merkel closed the school in Norman's memory." That day's game with Clarence was canceled.

Sadly, the family had to go retrieve Norman's suit from the cleaners. "He was supposed to get it that Thursday," remembered Merlin. "So we went down to get it and put him in a casket instead of getting his class picture taken. It really shook up my folks, especially my mother." The Dirks family visited the Latare farm and brought flowers. Melvin came home on leave from the Navy. The whole Wyoming team attended the Sunday funeral service, which filled the school gymnasium.

In fact, Frieda Latare suffered considerably. Her youngest boy had been taken away by an errant baseball. "My mother, it really bothered her," Merlin continued. "She didn't like it out there any more. My dad had quite a time, trying to keep her happy." Melvin added, "She took shock treatment. For a few hours, it was all right. A couple of days later, it was the same thing all over again. It's just a good thing our dad was the kind of guy he was. He was just easygoing and kept it calm and did what she wanted to do and when she wanted to do it."

When the word came that another Clifford Dirks baseball had killed another boy, over in Lisbon, Merlin said, "We couldn't believe it. My mother was in terrible shape, and then when that happened, it brought it all back. My dad handled it pretty well, but my mother had a terrible time. I guess she thought about it until the day she died."

Jens Latare died of cancer in 1963; Frieda lived until 1990. "She was always kind of depressed," Merlin wound up. "She never did get over it, really."

Together, the two brothers and I visited Mayflower Cemetery and the family plot.

What might Norman have done had he graduated? Chances are he would have farmed. When Melvin married and returned home, the parents moved into town. Melvin farmed for 10 years, "but we couldn't make a go of it with two families, so we left the farm" while Merlin stayed on. Melvin had trained as an electrician in the service, and worked on construction until he retired.

## Glen Rhoads

Glen's sister Mary was two years behind him in school, a sophomore at the time. Glen was the oldest child, the only boy in the family. Mary was one of three daughters to Lee Rhoads and his wife Sara. The family came from the Dakotas where Lee was originally a butter maker for Blue Valley Creamery. He moved first to Leon, Iowa, and opened his own creamery in partnership with another man, but had turned to farming just a few years earlier. Lisbon had about 1000 people at the time, mostly a farming community, though a good number of people commuted into Cedar Rapids.

Glen was just finishing up his senior year at Lisbon High School and a second baseman for the Lisbon Lions as well as for American Legion Post 109.

Mary was at the game May 3, 1949 when Glen was himself struck by a fatal baseball. Both of their parents were at the game, too. It was just ten days before Glen was going to graduate from Lisbon High School. He had, as usual, ridden his bicycle to school that morning. Glen had been interested in baseball since sixth grade, when the Rhoads family lived in Walford, before they moved to Lisbon. Like Norman Latare, Glen was also almost consumed with the love of baseball. "We bought him a glove," recalls his father Lee Rhoads. "I suppose we bought him a bat. We moved over here to Lisbon and had a farm with a big barn. He'd bring home balls the school would throw away. He was up nights when he was supposed to be throwing down hay for the cows. He'd be up there throwing that ball around for an hour. He'd forget about milking. He lived baseball." Lee himself had played a little ball in his own youth. Scrub teams out in the country, a bit of high school ball—catcher, second base, first. Whenever Glen played, his father made the games—every single one.

There were even a couple of scouts who'd reportedly given Glen a look, one from the Indians and one from the White Sox. He was small, though, at 5'6" or 5'7" and slight at 130, 140 at most—nonetheless, a good singles and doubles hitter, a good runner and a second baseman who covered some ground. Lee felt his son's short stature was going to hold him back. Though Glen was in the Future Farmers of America, he didn't think his son likely to take up farming. "I don't think he wanted to be on a farm. That was going to be a sad day once he got out of high school. There wouldn't be as much playing ball anymore. Maybe with the town team a little bit. He just wanted to play ball."

Glen showed a lot of artistic talent. What he might have done in life we shall never know.

Glen's father, who celebrated his 101st birthday in March 2002, saw the accident unfold. "Glen took a lead off second base. The pitcher [Dirks] turned and threw. When Glen went back to the bag, he turned his back to the ball and the second baseman just stood there and let it hit him. He made no effort to catch it, or stop

it. Things happen. I'm a firm believer that things happen because they're supposed to happen. No one seems to recall how Glen earned second base. And, as with the game with Oxford Junction, no one recalls who won—nor was the score of either game reported in the newspapers. Don Unash, a Lisbon teammate, can still recall the sickening sound of the ball striking Glen, though. "It was just like a 'pop'—I can remember a pop or a splat, like he almost hit a watermelon or something. I remember that distinctly. He led off and Dirks must have thought he could pick him off. It hit him right in the head. They stopped play for 5 minutes and took him to the hospital."

Mary recalls Glen as having run partway to third when the coach yelled at him to get back to the bag. "The ball hit him at the base of the brain," Mary remembers. The Rhoads took him in their car, to Dr. Gardner, in Lisbon. "They thought he just had a concussion and they took him home. We had a big old farmhouse. He talked afterward, but once he got in the house and lay down he never offered to get up again. He never was unconscious, though."

Wyoming's shortstop Dusanek explained how the play developed. "We had kind of a special pickoff play. I had given the signal to the catcher and the catcher had relayed it to Cliff, that after the next pitch I was going to try to get behind the runner at second. We'd do like almost a pitchout, just a little bit outside, and the catcher would fire the ball back to the pitcher real quick. As soon as Cliff pitched the ball, he'd throw the ball back to Cliff and I'd break for second base. I broke to the bag and Cliff whirled to throw to second base.

"It was just one of those things, that he threw at me rather than to the bag. He just turned and he threw right at me. I took maybe another step or two, but then stopped and reached back [to where I'd been a moment before] just as far as I could possibly reach back, hoping to catch the ball. It hit the very tip of the glove's fingers. He had his back to the pitcher, and it hit him right at the base of the skull. It hit my glove and then hit him immediately. It just barely touched the glove. He took maybe two steps and went down. I immediately hollered over to the Lisbon bench to get a doctor there. It had knocked him out, but he was laying on his back with his head resting on second base. That's the way he fell! It's all so weird. [As a baserunner, Glen was safe at second.] They drove right onto the field with a car and got out some smelling salts and brought him to. He was coherent. The doctor said, 'Look, we're going to go down to the office.' Several people helped him up and helped him into the doctor's car, and they went down to the office.

"I would imagine maybe one inning went by and the doctor brought him back and he sat on the bench the rest of the game."

After returning home around 5 or 6 in the evening, Glen lay down on the couch in what they called the east room. The family retired a few hours later, though Sara lay in the living room, to be near Glen. Around 10, Glen hollered at her that he



was having trouble breathing. Sara called the doctor, who rushed over in his car, and they decided to take Glen to the hospital, the doctor driving with Sara up front and Lee in the back seat with his son. Mary says, "On Mount Vernon Road there was a grocery store right there and a big streetlight and as they got to that streetlight, he was in the back seat with my dad—my dad was holding him—and the fluid started coming out of his ears and nose. Dad didn't say anything at all until they got to the hospital. The doctor said there probably wasn't anything they could have done for him."

Over 350 people attended Glen's funeral, including the players and coaches from both Wyoming and Oxford Junction. May 8 was Mother's Day.

Glen's bicycle was retrieved and still sits in Mary's basement in Lisbon to this day.

Mary recalls her father's stoicism. "Instead of mourning outwardly, he mourned inwardly. It turned his hair gray [immediately]. That's what the doctor said. It just turned his hair gray. For years and years, every year on Glen's birthday, he would just get moody. Silent. Just let the day go, and start the next day anew." The family rarely talked about it afterward. "It does not come up in a conversation with my father. That was always a subject that was skirted around at home—because he died in my dad's arms." Mary and her sister Elva Lee talked with their father before my visit, to be sure he was really OK about the visit and he said he was. We visited in his home, then drove to the cemetery and walked to Glen's grave. He seemed to handle it all very well indeed.

Baseball remained Mary's favorite sport, and her father regularly watched Mary's own sons John and Scott play baseball. Scott is an avid collector of baseball memorabilia to this day. There was one real scare Mary suffered briefly when Scott was a sophomore in high school. He was pitching one day in Norway, Iowa (home of major league pitcher Mike Boddicker) and Mary was at the game. "One of the Norway pitchers hit a ball so hard that when it hit Scott on the side of the face, it knocked him down on the mound. That was kind of scary. It brought the feeling back right away." Fortunately, Scott was not seriously injured and didn't even require a stitch. Another time, Scott's team was playing in Tiffin, down by Iowa City. Scott was on first and took a lead 3 or 4 times, looking to steal second. The pitcher threw over each time, and on the last throw, Scott slid back in face first and the first baseman kicked him in the mouth, breaking his jaw. "I stopped in Iowa City," Mary says, "called our doctor right away and came up the highway about 100 miles an hour." He lost a few teeth, but has remained "a baseball nut...like Glen, slept, ate and drank baseball. He coached Babe Ruth. He heard the story about Glen at a fairly early age. In fact, he has Glen's glove and his cleats.

"We still go to the softball and baseball games in Lisbon here."

## Clifford Dirks

Both of the families of the victims seem to have adjusted as best they could—though both Frieda Latare and Lee Rhoads manifestly suffered for many, many years. Did Clifford Dirks really come through as unscathed as it had sounded when we had talked on the telephone?

It was time to visit Clifford Dirks. Carl Mays had not been traumatized by the fatal pitch that struck down Ray Chapman, but Mays had a reputation as a brush-back artist, "a mean s.o.b." I knew, too, that Clifford Dirks had seemed phlegmatic and not that disturbed by my phone call weeks earlier. That didn't mean I wasn't more than a little apprehensive as I drove down—and past—405 East Main Street, the main drag in Wyoming. Really, the only drag. I spotted the house as I drove by, but continued on past so I could mentally psych myself up for actually ringing the doorbell. A couple of doors down, I noted a service station bearing the sign over the door, "Prop. Cliff Dirks". I wasn't really sure I wanted to intrude, but I'd called ahead and I was expected, so I parked for a while, marshaled my thoughts and emotions and then headed back.

Cliff Dirks welcomed me in, too, as did his wife Sandy. Again, we sat at a small dining table and I put my cassette recorder up on the table and asked my questions.

Cliff was 14 when his St. Louis Cardinals won the 1946 World Series and he remains a staunch Cardinals fan today. Stan Musial was his favorite player, but from the start Cliff wanted to be a pitcher. Bob Feller of the Cleveland Indians hailed from Van Meter, Iowa—about 175 miles away—and Cliff had him as a hero.

Dirks came from a poor family. "My dad used to farm in Olin. He went through the Depression and lost his farm. When he was 49, he had a heart attack in the potato patch. He didn't do too much after that." His father worked some for the vet in Wyoming, helping answer the phone, and did what he could to help his wife, Cliff, Cliff's two brothers and three sisters. The family lived in town, just across the street from Cliff's current home.

The girls played basketball, but all the Dirks boys played baseball, though it was never a father-son thing. The elder Dirks had never played ball. "My parents were very poor. I earned my own way. Made my own money. I used to go down here to the baseball field [one can see the Wyoming field from the rear of his home] and chase balls out into the field and get my own balls that way. I had broken bats—tape them up."

He worked at a grocery store and service station—the very station he came to own and runs today with his son—stocking shelves. He worked all through high school. It was his pitching that won him a full scholarship to college.

Cliff's older brother Donnie was quite a good player. "He played some third base but he was basically a pitcher. He pitched in the Army quite a bit. He threw 3 or 4 no-hitters over in Japan during Occupation time. When Cliff was 12 or 13, he saw a player slide into Donnie at third base, and break Donnie's ankle.

Cliff himself grew tall—he was 6'3" when he graduated high school. A right-handed pitcher, at 160-165 pounds, he attracted some attention from legendary Chicago Cubs scout Cy Slapnicka. While playing junior legion ball, he says he got a letter from the Cubs wanting to offer him a contract, but he was under 16 at the time and couldn't accept.

Playing high school ball for the Wyoming Eagles during the fall season, as we've learned, one pitch went astray. Norman Latare slipped and the ball hit him and he later died from the injury. "It was muddy enough we shouldn't have played," Dirks reiterated. Cliff knew Norman from playing ball and, after the accident, his mother sat Cliff down. Both she and two of Cliff's sisters talked him through a difficult time. There was no minister or other counsel involved. It was handled in the family.

He recalls hitting Glen the next spring, behind the ear as he slid into second base. Glen had a long lead off second base, maybe starting to make a move toward third. It was a pickoff play Dirks and his catcher had worked on: "the catcher threw it to me and I whirled and threw to second."

Cliff is sure he attended both funerals, but he retains no specific memories. "People in the area and in the whole conference were very understanding," Dirks recalls. As to the A.P. report that he had gone into seclusion, it wasn't for very long. "That was just a one day deal. Everybody was real nice. It was an accident, that's all."

These days, chances are there would be lawyers all over the place. No one seems to have even thought about hiring lawyers, and there wasn't a lawyer in town in any event. There might have been one over in Anamosa, he thinks. Credit is due the parents of all three families, and to the communities in which they lived, that events did not escalate and become adversarial.

There was some initial reaction that the Rhoads family recalls hearing, that "Dirks was a killer" and the like—but Glen's mother Sara helped cut off that sort of talk by her own clear understanding that these were accidents—nothing more and nothing less. Mary Martin comments, "People called Clifford a 'killer' because he had hit two boys in the same school year. I think some people were angry. People in the community. But my parents held nothing against him. They even put something in the paper that it was an accident." Cliff Dirks was, fortunately, spared hearing those comments.

Don Dusanek remembers, "Two or three days after, maybe after the funeral...Cliff worked at that station, and something came up. His oldest brother was going to work for him that morning, and he got a telephone call from Canada at the station, a reporter wanting to know if he'd done it on purpose. I understand that the line was blue all the way to Canada.

"Any ball game that we played, if Cliff was playing or if his brother Donnie was playing town team baseball. He pitched also, and that made it bad. If anybody would get hit, there was always somebody in the crowd who would holler, 'Whatcha trying to do? Kill another one?' That went on for maybe 3 or 4 years. Just comments made."

How had the news impacted the Latare family? Merlin Latare "heard about it at the time" but is fairly sure his parents never reached out to Glen Rhoads' parents.

Cliff continued to play baseball. "I know I won two games after that. One was a 10-0 shutout and the other one was a 10-2 game against Olin. I was throwing away all the time, all the time away." He'd been given a full boat scholarship to Upper Iowa University at Fayette. "I played shortstop and first base, anywhere they needed me. I kept playing, but I didn't pitch after that. I tried to, but I just didn't have any confidence in throwing. They didn't take the scholarship away from me. I just ran out of money," he adds, explaining why he had not graduated.

Dusanek remembers, too, that the first game Cliff pitched in presented a difficult hurdle. "I know that Cliff made the statement, 'I'll never pitch again.' Our coach called each one of us individually—other than Cliff—in to talk, and he told me, as far as Cliff knows, you're going to pitch the next game. But you are not pitching. This is what he told everybody. Cliff has got to go out on the mound or he will probably never play baseball again. So we went to the next game and I warmed up like I was going to start pitching. When it came time to go out onto the field, the coach said, 'Well, Cliff. Out on the mound.' Cliff said, 'No.' The coach said, 'Yes. You're going out there. You're gonna pitch.' Well, the first inning, I don't remember for sure, I think the score was like 13-0 before he threw a strike. The coach had told us he was going to stay in there until he could pitch again, so we expected that. Then he came around and started pitching, and did well. As I remember, we ended up winning the game."

Cliff Dirks continued to play semi-pro ball in town with the Wyoming Cardinals. "We played 30 to 50 games a summer. We didn't make very much money, maybe thirty bucks a game. I played until I was 28, 29 and our team folded up. Then we started playing fast pitch softball. I did that for a few years until a tree fell on me while we were cutting down trees."

At the funeral, Don Dusanek says, Sara Rhoads came up to Cliff after the service

and she told him, "We don't want you to blame yourself. The last thing that Glen said was, 'Don't blame Cliff. It was an accident.'" She also wrote Cliff a very forgiving letter. "They prayed for me, that's what she wrote. She was very religious. It made me feel real good. It really did." It helped immensely that Mrs. Rhoads was so generous and understanding in her feelings; the Rhoads and Dirks families even traded Christmas cards for years. Cliff hadn't known that, until I told him that Lee Rhoads had told me so, but said he was not at all surprised. "That would be my mother," he allowed.

Glen's mother Sara, in fact, went well beyond the call of ritual forgiveness. She truly felt for Clifford and understood the damage which he could have suffered, and did not want the tragedies to ruin yet another life. A little over two years later, when another boy was killed in an area ball game, Mrs. Rhoads wrote a long letter to the *Gazette*. She wrote, in part, "Seems we live in a day and age when some one or something must be to BLAME for everything." If we're going to have our kids take part in athletic contests, well, things happen sometimes and we have to take the consequences. When Glen was killed, did we blame the Dirks boy? No. Did we blame the coach? No. Did we blame Glen for not turning to see the ball coming? No. She says the feeling had been high in Lisbon against the Dirks boy, and her minister had urged her to put something in the local papers at the time. She said she understands how the grieving parents of this new boy killed feel, but "God alone gives life and God alone takes it away." She then cited three Biblical verses.

"My mother was no saint," Mary told me. She had her run-ins with folks sitting in "her" pew at the church, for instance. But in this one matter, she truly shone.

Did Cliff Dirks ever suffer from nightmares? Not really. "Oh, I thought about it several times," he agreed, indicating that he ran through it in his mind many times. But not in terms of nightmares and anguish. "I realized all the time that it was an accident. I've thought about if we'd only had helmets." Did he ever have the feeling that this was really unfair to him? A heavy burden he'd had to bear? "No, I didn't really. I just never thought a thing about it. I knew it happened. I woke up a few times, but not with nightmares or anything like that." However he handled it psychologically—through a combination of support from friends and family and the extraordinary empathy shown by Sara Rhoads (and perhaps aided by a strong sense of fatalism—perhaps better characterized as acceptance—deeply rooted in the people of these eastern Iowa communities), Cliff acknowledges when asked that he was indeed fortunate the twin incidents did not mar him for life.

It was never something the communities dwelt on. Lisbon folks raised some money—with a baseball game as part of the fundraising—for a memorial to Glen in the school. Oxford Junction also has a memorial in their high school. There were no ongoing lawsuits, and—quite clearly—no ongoing news coverage. People got on with their lives. And it wasn't something that Cliff Dirks suffered

from. It was never a subject of ongoing conversation. Cliff even told me, "I don't even know if my kids know it. Their mother would have had to tell them or they would have had to have somebody else tell them. All my kids were athletes. They didn't play baseball. Football." And Merlin Latare often stops by Dirks' service station to buy gas.

Though I understood how well Clifford Dirks had dealt with this situation, I find over a year later that I'm still very hesitant to call him. I wanted to ask him a few more questions, to finish this story, and to ask him if he had any photographs of himself in a baseball uniform from around the time in question. I was again worried around raising subject matter he may have thought was finally put to rest, worried again to write down my questions in advance so I wouldn't stumble, anxious about asking for confirmation that, indeed, he had never told his son—and wanting to know if he had done so since my visit.

I did finally get up the courage and called him in November. Sandy and he couldn't have been friendlier. He's sold the service station and retired, and was just about to head out for the winter in Yuma, Arizona. Had he ever told Craig, their son?

"I don't think I've ever brought it up," Cliff told me (and he hadn't mentioned my visit to town, either.) "I think he probably knows. This is a small town. Real small. We don't raise the subject ever. But I don't know if he knows anything about it. My older daughter Patty might have said something to him, but I don't think it's ever been brought up between he and I.

"I have three daughters and a son. Patty was told about it years ago. I suppose somebody mentioned it to her, I don't know. We don't bring it up too often."