

# "WILD BILL" KELLY

## Short Biography of a Sports Legend

By Howard Schwartz

### Preface

William Carl "Wild Bill" Kelly remains a Montana football legend many years after his death at the tragically young age of 26. My reasons for telling his story are twofold -- first to present new research material about Kelly, and secondly to replace misinformation with fact about him and about sports of the 1920's and 30's.

Memories often fade when one thinks back too many years, and many of the people I talked with who knew Kelly could not remember specific details. Dates and places sometimes became guesses, particularly because Kelly kept his own circle of friends and because official pro football records were not kept until 1933, two years after his death. Many individuals I interviewed or heard from by mail consciously or unconsciously adopted the attitude of "if you can't say something good about a man, don't say anything," and so negative facts were often brushed aside. Many sources admitted, sometimes embarrassingly, that they had never heard of Kelly.

Kelly was as much a part of Montana as Montana was a part of him. The stories of his exploits on and off the football field have been passed on by the men of his generation.

I hope by this research I will help sketch a clearer and fuller picture of a man who helped put his state's name on the lips of those who loved sports -- especially football.

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On page 36 of the 1923 edition of the Bitter Root, Missoula County High School's annual, is a picture of a flat-nosed, dour-looking boy who appears older than his 17 years.

This boy is William Carl Kelly.

Beneath the picture is a poem, which would seem to have some morbid tone. It reads:

Breathes there a man with soul so dead  
Who knows not the immortal Bill?  
Then let him die  
For in MCHS he amounts to nil.

By 1923, sports had entered "The Golden Era." Bobby Jones had become a household word in golf, Red Grange, the "Gallopig Ghost" of Illinois, had etched his name into the book of football immortals, and Finland's Paavo Nurmi had lowered the world record in the mile to 4 minutes and 10.4 seconds, a record which was to stand for a decade.

Bill Kelly was born in Denver, Colo., June 24, 1905 in a house on Josephine Street and delivered by a woman doctor by the name of Drake. Named for one of his grandfathers, Kelly was the son of James and Annie Kelly, originally from South Dakota. James Kelly had been a farmer. In Denver he was in the wholesale liquor business.

James Kelly died at the age of 38 of pneumonia. In 1909 his wife took four-year-old Bill to Butte, Montana, where she married Otis Johnson Price.

Bill Kelly's new father worked for the Northern Pacific Railroad. He earned \$100 a month and worked 16 hours a day. Price worked for Northern Pacific for 45 years.

In 1923 he divorced Mrs. Kelly, just as Bill entered Montana University as a freshman. Price claimed the reason for the breakup was that Mrs. Kelly refused to learn how to manage money. Price never adopted Bill, so the Kelly name stayed with him.

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Between the ages of four and seven, as Price remembers it in an interview, young Bill learned to know the town and the people on his own. "He learned to love Missoula, as he fished and ice skated," Price said.

A thin, gaunt man, but still remarkably alert for an 85-year-old, Price reminisced how he would "be home at midnight and up at eight."

On weekends, Price would fish, with young Bill tagging along. It was not sport fishing, Price emphasized, but a means of putting food on the table.

Bill, his mother and stepfather lived at 738 North Fourth Street in Missoula, beginning in 1916. He bought the lot the house still stands on for \$700 and paid \$1000 for materials and labor.

When the family breakup came in 1923, it was almost as if Bill dropped out of sight in his stepfather's life.

Price's voice dropped softly as he recalled the three years that elapsed from the time of Bill's death to the time he was finally traced for notification.

Little is known about the extent of Bill's religious beliefs. He was raised a Catholic, Price recalls, "but Bill only went to church once in a while," he added.

Price recalls young Bill asked many questions when he would take the youngster along on Northern Pacific trips to Chicago or St. Louis, but said "Bill was always glad to return to Missoula."

Although Kelly became a legend in Montana football history, Price never saw his stepson play. "I was too busy making a living, and besides, I didn't care for the sport -- it was too rough-house for me. I liked baseball better," he said.

Bill had his appendix removed at the age of nine and his tonsils out at 12, according to his mother. Aside from that, she cannot remember him ever being ill or missing a class in high school or college because of illness.

"My first recollection of him was at Whittier [a grade school in Missoula], where he was known as 'Willie Price'," Billy Dugal McFarland said.

McFarland, a year younger than Bill, became a close lifelong friend of his, admitting, "If Bill took a liking to you, he stayed that way."

The new name "Willie Price" was quickly dispensed with by young Bill, who, as McFarland remembers, "flattened one boy and threatened to do the same to anyone else who called him anything but Bill Kelly."

Kelly and McFarland attended Missoula County High School together, from 1919 to 1923. McFarland remembers Kelly as "having brown hair and brown eyes, with big shoulders, arms and legs, and weighing about 165 in high school." As far as Kelly's personality went, McFarland said "Bill was never a braggart," and remembers him "as always ready to give kids younger than him a pat on the back.... He'd never pick a fight, but never walk away from one."

Kelly's ability to handle himself in a fight was permanently established on May 23, 1923, when he sparred with Tommy Gibbons before 1,400 people at the old Liberty Theatre in Missoula.

Gibbons, in the city for a barnstorming tour to help promote tickets for the July 4 world heavyweight title bout with Jack Dempsey, agreed to meet the then 17-year-old Kelly, in a four-round exhibition.

In the Missoulian of February 5, 1947, Ray Rocene remembered "Gibbons went two rounds with Bud Gorman -- then he was asked to take on 'Wild Bill' Kelly. Gibbons consented graciously, expecting another tapping waltz." An article in the April 5, 1948 Missoulian says "Gibbons came out smiling, shaking hands, Kelly came out swinging with all he had.... The wily Kelly was looking for fame and headlines. He was a good boxer, far better than average and nearly as big as Tommy [Gibbons]."

McFarland remembers the bout "as a real slugfest," and after Kelly surprised Gibbons with a "solid right to the stomach," Gibbons backed off, relying on footwork to stay away from his young but aggressive opponent. Neither man was ever knocked off his feet, McFarland said.

As an indication of Kelly's early fistic reputation, McFarland cited the fact that Bill sold Missoulians five years, from 8 to 13, and he had no competitors in the area.

Deane Jones of the Missoulian, a Phi Sigma Kappa fraternity brother of Kelly's, attended high school with him.

Jones recalls an incident in 1921 when he and Kelly were skating at the Municipal Ice Rink. As Jones remembers it, Kelly, then 15, was being "sassed by a soldier, who

must have been 19 or 20." After taking the verbal abuse for awhile, Kelly walked off the ice, approached his antagonist and "belted him in the mouth."

Kelly's ability on a football field even in his high school years is depicted in the Grizzly Gridiron, under the selection "Humorous History of the Grizzlies":

Wild Bill Kelly was a junior in high school, and his fame as a gridder was so widespread that many college coaches were already camping on his doorstep. "Son, I'll make you an All-American [sic] player at our school," was the offer of Idaho's coach. "Hell, I'd make you an All-American [sic] coach," the cocky Kelly shot back. The question of whether Kelly was cocky or just fearless and full of confidence in his natural ability is something most people who knew him never fully agreed upon. It all depended on how well you knew him and how much he trusted you as a friend.

In June, 1923 Kelly, an Irish Catholic, had a chance to go to Notre Dame. Neither stepfather Price nor anyone interviewed was positive about the facts, but it seems Notre Dame wanted Kelly and Kelly had a big decision to make.

Price refers to Kelly's "love for Montana" as the reason he never left the state.

But McFarland and Jones say the reason was H.O. Bell, an automobile dealer, and the late John Campbell, Sr., the father of KGVO radio station manager John Cambell.

Bell said Kelly "was pretty well sold for going back there, but I talked him into staying here, and paid him \$75 a month for four years" to work for him. But he admitted "he didn't do much work," with a knowing chuckle. In effect, Kelly became the first Montana athlete ever to be classified in the scholarship class.

Kelly enrolled at Montana University in September 1923. Emma Lommasson, assistant registrar, indicated "Kelly was an average student in high school and at college," looking at his records. She indicated he was working toward teaching credentials in physical education, "although there were no majors indicated in those days."

According to Mrs. Lommasson, Kelly never did graduate, although he lacked only two quarters of work for his degree. Records show Kelly did register for the Spring, 1927 quarter but later withdrew.

On the same freshman football team was John Russell ("Russ") Sweet, a 19-year-old from Miles City. Sweet and Kelly become teammates and fast friends. Sweet had the speed and kicking ability, Kelly provided the throwing arm and running ability.

Sweet's obituary in the Missoulian of March 12, 1944 described their relationship:

Kelly and Sweet were comrades in sports through three [sic] arduous seasons at Montana State University. They were not of the same type, Sweet coming from a home where he was a cherished and favored son, Kelly being mostly on his own, across the tracks style.

Sweet was born in Kilbanon, Wisc. in 1904. He excelled in other sports besides football, especially basketball and track, whereas Kelly favored baseball and boxing. Ironically, both men died in the prime of their lives, Kelly at 26, Sweet at 39.

The first time the Kaimin mentions either man is October 3, 1923. In 1923 the Kaimin was a biweekly, Tuesdays and Fridays, so much of the timeliness of a Saturday football game was lost by the time it reached the first edition of the week.

Much has been written about Kelly, Sweet ...the backfield men, and in the workouts they have been showing the form expected of them.

The Kaimin has a habit of not using an individual's first name or checking inconsistencies in spellings. On numerous occasions, Kelly's name is misspelled "Kelley."

Curiously, Kelly's first name was mentioned only once, in the win over Montana State. It also appears that the person writing pre-game stories for the Kaimin for the Friday edition stayed with Kelley (sic) and was a different person than the one writing follow-up stories, mentioning him as Kelly.

In 1923, Montana State University was a member of the Northwest Conference.

The Cubs were 5-0, although the last game was against "a Butte Independent team" (called the Hubs). So impressive were the Kelly-led frosh, they scored 213 points and allowed only 19, with no opponent scoring more than once in a game.

So enthusiastic was the Kaimin about the freshmen, the newspaper (limited to four pages except on special occasions) gave the team equal coverage with the varsity team on page 1.

After defeating Hamilton High School 67-0, Kelly had his best day as quarterback of the Cubs in a 61-0 win. According to the Kaimin, the "...feature of the game was the

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brilliant open-field running and plunging of Billy Kelly, who crossed the Aggie line five times."

Kelly scored on runs of 3, 5, 17 and 23 yards and on a 45-yard punt return. He also had time to toss touchdown passes of 60 and 70 yards to Sweet.

As the Grizzly Guide puts it, "The Kelly to Sweet passing combination, which later proved to be the best in the University's history, was even then unstoppable."

Lynn Thompson, who played freshmen football with Kelly and later pledged the Mu Deuteron chapter of Phi Sigma Kappa, pinpointed one colorful incident of the 1923 season:

We were playing the Washington State freshmen at Pullman. Russ Sweet kicked a booming 70-yard punt that went across the tracks to a field house. As the ball soared up in the air, Kelly put his hands on his hips and hollered, "Put a bell on that you farmer bastards."

Another version of that story appears in The Grizzly Guide:

Russ Sweet booted a 90-yard quick kick against the Washington State freshmen. The ball bounded out of the stadium and came to rest near the door of the Cub warming house. "Leave it there, we'll pick it up at halftime," one of the Cubs shouted to a manager.

Both Joseph Cochran and Thompson, former teammates of Kelly's, give strong indications he was in need of "academic assistance" while in class.

Thompson says of Kelly:

He was not a student but always managed to pass the subjects he took. I saw him go to an anatomy exam once with his wrist and forearms printed clear to the elbows with the names of bones, tendons, etc. He told me later it got him by....

Cochran says:

Bill had a bright, quick mind, but he was not a good student. He could have been, but I strongly suspect that through high school and college his ability as a football player made everyone lenient... far too lenient... with him. Four of us freshmen players sat in the back row of Burly Miller's history section. If Bill didn't know the answer to a question, he would ask one of us in a stage whisper, and it was simpler to give him the answer than not.

The exploits of Kelly and others of the freshmen Cubs did not go unnoticed.

Seeking to expand, the Pacific Coast Conference, on the strength of the Montana freshman team's impressive five straight victories, invited representatives of the school to a meeting in Berkeley, California.

On December 8, according to the Kaimin of December 11, 1923, the decision was reached.

Montana would be allowed to become the the ninth member of the Pacific Coast Conference, joining the California, Washington, Stanford, U.S.C., Idaho, Washington State, Oregon, and Oregon Agricultural College (now Oregon State).

In 1924, Montana State University had a new coach, Earl "Click" Clark. It was the first time that M.S.U. had a coach from its own graduate ranks. Clark, according to the Seattle Post-Intelligencer obituary of April 14, 1959, "looked so much like Ike [Dwight David Eisenhower], he once stopped traffic in New York's Grand Central Station."

If an individual wanted to know how far a Montana player ran for a touchdown in the 1920's, it all depended on which source he favored: the Kaimin, the Missoulian, the hometown newspaper of the opposing team or record books of that era. But it didn't seem to matter in the 1923-26 coverage. The big question was whether Kelly scored a touchdown or not.

McFarland, attending college in Gonzaga, recalls the extent of Kelly's scoring reputation this way:

There was a place in Spokane called Dope Smith's. It had a huge blackboard on it, on which bets and challenges of kinds were written. When Kelly played for Montana, there was always a standing bet. Someone would always offer \$100 or more sometimes, Kelly would score a touchdown. And as I remember it, there was always a sucker to take the bet.

Perhaps it was the game against the University of Washington on October 18, 1924 that helped establish Kelly as a legend of sorts.

The story was apparently written especially for the Kaimin October 21, by "G. Scherck, Montana Football Captain 1919," and sports reporter with the Seattle Post-

Intelligencer. The flavor and tone of his writing is typical of how Montanans felt about Kelly, and how, decades later, they still talk about him:

Stocky, fleet of foot, Kelly, a State University of Montana football player with a fighting heart and a smile, wrote his name across the Northwest football sky here today in deeds so brilliant and courageous that in years to come they will talk about Kelly.

The author goes on to describe Kelly's feats, after a short mention that his team lost by a 52-7 score:

When the referee's gun ended the struggle at the stadium, football critics hailed Kelly the greatest open field runner and safety man that had ever played against the University of Washington.

Scherck goes on to isolate the one play among many Kelly made in a losing cause that established him as a collegiate great:

Kelly caught a Washington kick on his own 25- yard line and again romped down the field. First he dodged an end and tackle, then stiff-armed Westrom, Washington end and started toward the goal line. He then found five Huskies in his way, but sidestepped them and as the stands roared, crossed the goal line, the first man to accomplish this feat this year [against Washington].

Caught up in his own enthusiasm, Scherck throws what little objectivity he had left out the window:

The crowd went crazy talking about Kelly. Washington's well-oiled juggernaut was forgotten. The score no longer mattered. Montana's star, (in only his third varsity game) after crossing Washington's goal line for the second time [the first touchdown run was called back, when an official ruled Kelly stepped out of bounds], was the villain who turned into a hero.

A poorly worded sentence near the end of Scherck's story nevertheless sums up what he wanted to convey to his readers:

Kelly who still retained his smile, the 15,000 cheered, giving a visitor a greater ovation than any man has yet received at the stadium.

Kelly scored 12 touchdowns, good for 72 points in 1924.

The achievement was noted in the January 9, 1925 issue of the Kaimin, as well as his being chosen to Walter Camp's Collier's magazine All-America honorable mention team.

In the Kaimin article, Kelly is said to have been "but one touchdown behind [Red] Grange of Illinois," and he "was tied with Wilson of Washington for scoring the most touchdowns in north-western football."

An undated article in Mrs. Seibel's scrapbook from the Post-Intelligencer quotes Damon Runyon's column:

George Wilson of Washington, as great a halfback as ever wore cleated shoes, tells me that the greatest football player he [Wilson] ever played against is Kelly of Montana. I have mentioned Mr. Kelly before in this column the past month or so, on the advice of my Western operatives, who informed me early... that Mr. Kelly had football ability beyond normal.... "He's the hardest man to tackle I ever met," says Mr. Wilson. "He can dodge and turn and spin in amazing fashion. He's a real football player if one ever lived."

Mrs. Greta Seibel of Missoula, a schoolmate of his through high school and college, remembers Kelly well:

"As I remember him, he was built like a plowhorse. He seemingly could lean at fantastic angles. You could call him short rather than tall."

But ironically, Kelly, voted Montana's greatest football player in a November, 1969 poll by the Billings Gazette, never received the Grizzly Cup. The cup is presented annually to the M.S.U. athlete who "displays outstanding loyalty, service and scholarship as well as athletic ability during his undergraduate years at M.S.U."

The 1924 season was mediocre for Montana, which finished with a 4-4 mark, but it established Kelly as a name to remember in football.

Against Montana Mines, Kelly scored three touchdowns, including a 90-yard opening kickoff return, as M.S.U. won, 106-6, its second highest point total in history.

In the Gonzaga game, which the Spokane team won 20-14, Kelly had been getting "razzed by the opposition spectators," according to McFarland.

Two plays later, Kelly received the ball on a punt, and ran 75 yards for a touchdown. After placing the ball down in the end zone, as it was customary to do in those days, Kelly deliberately walked in front of the Gonzaga cheering section, put his thumb to his nose and waggled his fingers in a sign of derision, McFarland recalls.

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Don Foss, who was a freshman when Kelly was a senior in 1926, remembers "Wild Bill" in a letter this way:

He wasn't more than 5-9, 5-10 at the outside, weighing 180ish, but was immensely strong, as well as shifty and swivel-hipped. He could change direction instantly, a safety all alone had no chance with him, for he could run like a deer -- in high school he had been the 50-yard sprint champion. Or, instead of changing direction, with his great shoulders and leg drive he could run you into the ground. Another thing about him... he had the best straight-arm I have ever seen. He literally could knock you out with it, another thing that made him so hard to tackle.

As a freshman when Kelly was a senior I never got to play with him, but we freshmen had to face the varsity on scrimmage. So when I say stopping Kelly was like tackling a ten-ton truck I speak from experience.

Although no one I contacted said they saw Kelly smoke, the subject of drinking was another matter.

Charles Gleeson, a fraternity brother of Kelly's, was a senior when Kelly enrolled at M.S.U. Gleeson notes in a letter, "Kelly spent little time in the fraternity house, and preferred going out on the town at nights."

A teammate of Kelly's from 1924-26 in football, William Hodges says "he drank like all the rest of us. It was prohibition times, so it seemed fashionable to imbibe."

McFarland blames Kelly's problem with liquor on the townspeople, who would "saunter up to Kelly with a bottle and offer him a drink, just to make conversation and shake the hand of a good athlete."

No one contacted remembers Kelly ever keeping in shape by lifting weights, performing calisthenics, or doing any other physical activity.

"He had natural ability," stepfather Price said, "and didn't need to practice. He just liked to play football."

Apparently Kelly's drinking did come to the attention of a Reverend A.J. Harrington, because in 1925, Kelly signed a pledge card promising not to drink from March 22 to April 22. The card is in the possession of Mrs. Seibel.

Kelly's diet wasn't the most nutritious in his collegiate days. McFarland remembers "his love for great amounts of peanuts and a sweet tooth, which might cause him to eat 10 or more candy bars a day when it suited him."

Kelly received the nickname "Wild Bill" from an "unnamed sports-writer on the coast in 1924," according to McFarland, and he seemed to want to live up to it whenever possible.

Immediately after the 1924 football season was over, Kelly donned the basketball uniform for M.S.U.

George "Jiggs" Dahlberg has kept the only "near official" records of that era, because he said "every time there was a new coach or athletic director, they either didn't keep the books, or threw out what they had."

Dahlberg weighed 155 pounds and was 5-10 in 1925, and remembers "you didn't have to be in top shape for the sport then, because after each basket scored, there was a jump ball at center court."

Montana's basketball team had 9-10 and 5-10 records in 1925 and 1926, as Dahlberg's musty ledgers state. Kelly, who wore a rabbit's foot on his uniform, his only superstition as far as anyone remembers, scored 36 points in his junior year and 28 points as a senior.

Dahlberg says Kelly wasn't one of the starters, and that basketball wasn't one of his better sports, but because of his natural ability and aggressiveness, he got to play enough to satisfy "a hunger to compete."

"One time, we played the University of Oregon at Eugene. I think it was 1925. I went under the basket for a shot, and an opposing player punched me in the Adam's apple. Kelly, who was sitting on the bench, rushed over, pushed me out of the way, saying 'move back kid, you're too small' and took up the fight for me," Dahlberg said.

As a baseball player for three seasons, 1925-27, Kelly could handle three positions, catcher, third base and right field. An indication of his hitting ability is an anemic .213 in 1925 and .243 in 1926, the only averages listed in Dahlberg's books.

Kelly's enormous self-confidence may have strayed into the area of swell-headedness on occasions.

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Andy Cogwell, later Dean of Men at the University of Montana, played football with Kelly in 1923-26. He said "at times it was Kelly and Sweet and nine other guys it seemed."

Dahlberg remembers Kelly "was cocky. He glorified himself so much that teammate resentment began to build up."

Charles O. "Scorp" Anderson, who played baseball with Kelly in 1925-26, remembers "...he was good and tough -- and he knew it."

Anderson, in a letter, describes the intensity of Kelly toward winning: "...he actually wept when he lost." It is Anderson's opinion that Kelly's drinking problems stemmed from his family breakup problems, but there is no way of proving this.

In 1926, Major Frank Milburn took over as M.S.U. coach, replacing Clark.

"Milburn made no attempt to change Kelly's highly individualistic style of play -- it couldn't have been done. He did however, ask Kelly, who had been playing bareheaded for two years, to wear a regulation football helmet," Foss states.

The conversation, as Foss remembers it, went this way:

"Kelly, you'll have to wear a head guard," the Major told him one day at practice, soon after arrival in Missoula. "Are you warning me, coach?" asked Kelly with a grin.... "Not warning you, but telling you," said Major Milburn quietly. Kelly made no reply and turned away; but from then on, he wore a headgear.

But no picture has ever been found that has Kelly in headgear.

Kelly's final game of his collegiate career was against the University of Southern California, a 61-0 M.S.U. loss.

The Kaimin of November 12, 1926 makes mention of the fact Kelly planned to stay in California and "get some work to pay expenses." He was apparently waiting for the eastern pro football teams to barnstorm their way West. He says:

Should I have a chance to make some money playing professional football, I am convinced that I should be foolish to return to Montana to finish this quarter of school. I have played my three years at Montana and I feel I would be making a mistake to turn down any good proposition... when I am in California.

But another alternative pops up -- the possibility of Kelly attending West Point. The reason he never attended has never been clarified. A letter from the assistant archivist of the United States Military Academy dated October 30, 1969 states:

Kelly was appointed from the 1st Congressional District of Montana. He was found to be physically qualified, however, he declined to take the mental examinations....

But Kelly's mother was under the impression that he refused the appointment because he was selected as an alternate and not first choice. In addition, McFarland says Kelly popped off to some California sportswriter that he had already been chosen to go to West Point, and the military academy, hearing about Kelly's boasting, withdrew the invitation.

Kelly and Sweet, on the basis of past performances, each received invitations to play in the annual East-West Shrine football game in San Francisco, January 1, 1927.

As it turned out, the Montana boys were the difference. Kelly and Sweet were the only reason the West won, 7-3.

As Foss tells it, the East was leading 3-0, and late in the game, Babe Hollingsberry, Washington State Coach, who was also coach of the West, sent Sweet into the game to punt.

But the moment he [Kelly] saw Sweet, he had other ideas. "We won't punt, Russ," Kelly said. "No one will be looking for a fourth down pass...." Pass is what Kelly did, and Sweet broke loose for the touchdown Kelly envisioned. (The play covered 80 yards and still stands as a record.) ....A winning play on the spur of the moment was typical of Kelly, who had marvelous football instinct.

The period following the East-West Shrine game in San Francisco and his first pro football game in New York, from January to October 1927 was the most difficult to obtain information about.

Kelly, according to Jones, returned to Missoula and registered at M.S.U., but never attended classes and was "too busy playing semi-professional baseball" to worry about studies.

But on October 14, 1927, Kelly's name appeared in the starting lineup for the New York Yankees, where he was listed as a quarterback. He was credited with two touchdowns. The Yankees won over the Buffalo Bisons, 19-8 at Buffalo.

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Kelly played in 11 games as a fullback, halfback and quarterback in 1927. Harold "Red" Grange, who turned professional in 1925 and played ten years in professional football, was a teammate of Kelly's.

On November 9, 1927, Kelly's nickname of "Wild Bill" was mentioned in the sixth paragraph in an otherwise dull and poorly detailed story, which, as usual, lacked statistics of any kind and even neglected to state when the next game would be played involving either one of the teams.

Whether it is a coincidence or not it is hard to tell, but with Kelly playing the Yankees had a 7-win, 3-loss mark at midseason. Suddenly, Kelly was out for five games. There was no explanation, but the team lost every game he was absent from.

Kelly returned to Missoula for the winters of 1927 and 1928.

McFarland says Kelly told him he earned \$9,000 in 1927 alone. Part of that must have come from testimonials. One national advertisement for Lucky Strikes reads in part "After trying them all, I have decide on Luckies. They have never hurt my throat and they taste just right." The ad was signed "W.C. Bill Kelly." Montanans who knew Kelly must have chuckled at Bill's "sincerity." He never smoked.

Perhaps no one will ever know what Kelly earned in a year or a career. I.R.S. records are destroyed by law six years from the date of filing.

In 1928, Kelly again played for the New York Yankees, but this time Grange was not with the team. The Yankees lost their first six games, but finished with a 4-8-1 record.

To give an indication of how rough the game was, the New York Times of December 3, reported "The New York Giants were penalized five yards for kneeing Kelly."

In 1929, Kelly became a member of the Frankford Yellow Jackets.

Kelly kept in contact with his mother, who had since remarried twice and was living in Venice, California, under the name Schopp. But all letters and mementos were destroyed in a fire "of unknown origin" according to Mrs. Kelly.

A former Gonzaga football player, Ray Flaherty in a letter dated November 4, stated when he knew Kelly "...he was rugged, very confident of his ability and did not like anyone who would not give their best effort."

Flaherty mentions Kelly talked a great deal about Butte and the "good times he had there when in college." Thompson says Kelly liked Missoula while he attended M.S.U., "but liked to party in Butte."

"He would bring alcohol from Butte by the gallon and serve it to his friends just for the fun of it," Thompson comments.

Flaherty quotes Kelly's salary as "about \$3,500 a year."

He also mentions a very bad knee injury Kelly received in 1927 (which may account for the missing games).

"Kelly never had it operated on, and the cartilage bothered him. For that reason Kelly never had the chance to show his real ability," Flaherty says.

Yet Ed Haliki, one of the few surviving members of the 1929 Yellow Jackets, said "If Kelly were playing today, he would be one of the greatest. The game of today was made to order for him."

George Wilson, another teammate of Kelly's on the Yellow Jackets, and no relation to the Wilson of Washington mentioned earlier, says:

Believe me, "Wild Bill" as he would go to the left or right, leap into the air and throw a pass, could do it better than anyone other then Benny Friedman of Michigan and later the New York Giants, who was the best in my opinion.

Wilson brings up the subject of whether Kelly was ever married or not, one of the biggest question marks in researching the man.

Kelly was married, according to Wilson. He claims he knew Kelly better than anyone on the Frankford team, since he picked him up by car each day for practice sessions.

"I do not remember the name of the woman he married, but from his conversation, she was from New York," Wilson says in a letter. "He lived with friends of his wife in South Philadelphia, who were of Italian extraction."

Wilson says in the off-season in 1929, Kelly worked as a bouncer for a "speakeasy" in the Philadelphia area.

Wilson claims Kelly never expected to live very long and was taking a prescription drug "that was very strong but necessary."

"I do believe that 'Wild Bill' as we called him, could have been among the best of pro football had his basic health been better," Wilson concludes.



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As an example of how "respected" pro football was as a profession in the late 1920's and early 30's, Bernard Crowl, a former teammate of Kelly's on the 1930 Brooklyn Dodgers says:

I did not dare tell any future employer that I had played professional football. It then had a reputation for having largely players who never intended to do anything beyond just play football, and that's putting it mildly.

The effect of the newspapers on the players is interesting to note.

Friedman, in a letter, says: "In 1927 we played 23 games with 17 men. Nobody was newspaper conscious -- we were the poor relations, being pro football players."

Friedman remembers "having to fight for publicity. In fact, I traveled a day or two ahead of the team when we played away from home to visit newspaper offices for publicity."

He says that there are few records of any football contracts to use as references, mentioning that most agreements were by handshake and that professional football references were not kept officially until 1933.

One of the more vivid memories of that era belongs to James Schuber, a rare member of the United States Naval Academy who played professional football for one season. That year, 1930, was Kelly's last season as a pro.

Schuber remembers Kelly protecting him as a first-year man in professional football. (Schuber was 5'5", 155 pounds.) Although he lasted just one season, he remembers Kelly's kindness toward him. His letter describes a humorous incident regarding a bear:

We were staying in the St. George Hotel in Brooklyn. One day Stumpy [Thomason] asked Bill [Kelly] and I if we would go to the Bronx with him where he owned a "bar." We had six days off so up we went in a '28 Model A Ford. We arrived there and Stumpy parked in front of a pet shop. Bill and I thought it was a cover for a speakeasy until Stumpy returned with a brown bear on a leash. Bill and I did not trust the bear but we compromised and Bill and I sat in the rumble seat. Stumpy was wearing a fur coat and what with the refreshments we had along, Bill and I had a hard time telling whether Stumpy or the bear was driving. On arriving at the St. George, they would not let the bear in and Stumpy tied him up in the courtyard. The next day the Brooklyn Zoo accepted him. Twelve years later I visited the zoo and the bear was still there.

Schuber describes Kelly's ability on and off the field this way:

Kelly was a superior player and held in esteem by all the other teams. He was well liked, but I cannot stress too heavily on his accuracy in passing. Remember the shape of the ball in those days. I honestly believe he was more accurate than Sammy Baugh or Uinitas.

Kelly's last professional football game as far as the New York Times microfilm files indicate, was December 15, 1930, with the Brooklyn Dodgers defeating the Memphis Tigers at Memphis, 13-0.

Still, with all that is known about Kelly's exploits on the gridiron in his collegiate days, there is a glaring lack of information about his last five years.

What is known is that Kelly died November 14, 1931 after having taken ill while a spectator at the New York University-Fordham football game.

McFarland says Kelly "was in the process of getting in shape for the 1931 season, after another knee injury," and says he remembers reading "somewhere Kelly had signed his 1931 contract, although late in the season."

The New York Times story of the game, November 15, 1931, indicates "it was the largest crowd of the season for an eastern football game. There were 80,000 people in Yankee Stadium."

But it was the following Monday, November 16, before Kelly's obituary appeared in the Times.

Kelly's age is listed as 29 and his name is misspelled "Kelley." The obituary lists survivors as his wife, Louise Ruhl, his mother Anna and a sister.

"He became ill on returning home in the afternoon from the Fordham-NYU game. A doctor was summoned and remained with him until he died."

The five-paragraph obituary mentions that Kelly had consumed a large amount of peanuts and frankfurters and the cause of death was listed as "acute indigestion."

Cochran indicates when he was in New York with Kelly in 1931, "He told me that on Saturday afternoons, he and some other players would go to the football game and drink and watch the play."

For years, stories mentioning the death of Kelly have indicated "acute indigestion" as the cause.

A certificate of death from the Borough of Manhattan in New York City indicates cause of death as "acute alcoholism and coronary sclerosis."

Specifically, the death certificate does state Kelly was married and that his age was 29. Kelly was buried at Mt. Hope Cemetery on Hastings-on-the-Hudson, New York.

Forty years later, Kelly's mother does not believe Bill was ever married. According to Mrs. Kelly, the girl Bill was engaged to phoned her in California immediately after he died. She believes the girl's name was Lois, but admitted after so many years, "it's hard to remember the details."

Much of the available information is hearsay, and yet, legends are often created on that basis alone.

The final paragraphs of one of the final letters I received says much in regard to William Carl "Wild Bill" Kelly, and in a way, it summarizes this writer's purpose in researching the subject.

The letter is from Cochran, one man among many who knew Kelly. It reads:

At first, I was not going to answer your letter because of what happened to Bill. He was a hero at Montana and perhaps that's the way he should be remembered. You'll have to decide what use you want to make of my letter about Bill.

In Bill's tragic death there might be some message for the college society that basks in the glory of the football team and the individual heroes, but overlooks the fact that they are like the rest of us with conflicts, fears, frustrations, and weakness.