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## Red Barber

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Two weeks ago "Red" Barber died in Tallahassee. Since 1981 Barber has been a familiar voice on National Public Radio's Morning Edition. Each Friday morning at 7:35 "Red" sitting in his home in Tallahassee had a warm and interesting conversation with Bob Edwards, the Colonel. He would talk about the sports of the week, his recollections of sports past, and very often the state of his garden and the foliage of Tallahassee.

Walter Lanier Barber was born in 1908 in Columbus, Mississippi, and moved to Sanford, Florida, at age ten. He was named after one of his distant relatives, Sidney Lanier, best known as a poet and Southern gentleman. "Red" himself was both. His warm, charming, and gracious manner attested to the fact he was a Southern gentleman, while his life's work was testimony to his poetic skills. His career is a history of sports broadcasting in America.

Best remembered for his baseball broadcasts, Barber covered all sports. He was a pioneer in college football broadcasting, worked the National Football League, and covered the Olympics for CBS. Barber's approach was simple and extremely effective. Report what the eye sees, and do your homework before arriving at the stadium.

"Red's" career in broadcasting began at the University of Florida on WRUF a 5,000 watt campus station in 1930. Barber was a student at the University where he was working his way through school waiting tables and working as a janitor at the University Club. He got know faculty members including Professor Ralph Fulgham who had a forty-five minute radio show on farming. One day the Professor asked "Red" to come over to the station and help him out by reading one of three ten minute papers over the air. At first "Red" refused but when the Professor offered to buy him dinner he agreed. Red Barber made his radio debut reading, "Certain Aspects of Bovine Obstetrics." He had steak for dinner.

Major Powell, the station director immediately offered Red a job but he declined, pointing out he was already working two jobs to survive. After two months of refusal Powell asked Red how much money it would take to allow him to quit all those other jobs and come to work at WRUF. Quickly "Red" did some figuring in his head, then inflated the figure as a way to end the Major's persistence. He said he would need \$50 per month, and to "Red's"

surprise the Major said, "You start tomorrow." So much for career counseling and planning.

Barber became chief announcer and station director at WRUF and in 1934 he was hired by Larry MacPhail the volatile and innovative general manager of the Cincinnati Reds. MacPhail had decided to make radio a force in the marketing of Reds' baseball. For the next thirty-three years Barber broadcast major league baseball. For the next fifteen years his life was intertwined with that of MacPhail.

Barber was paid \$25 per week and was raised to \$50 per week at the end of the season, a handsome sum in the middle of the Great Depression. That fall Red branched out into college football doing play-by-play of University of Cincinnati and Ohio State. His career took off.

In Cincinnati Barber participated in a number of baseball and broadcasting firsts engineered by Larry MacPhail. The Reds were the first team to fly on a road trip, and Barber was along for a live broadcast from the plane. The Reds were the first team to play night baseball in the majors, and Barber was there. In 1935 he worked his first World Series, the first of twenty-three.

When MacPhail moved on to Brooklyn he called Red Barber to join him in 1939. Again the firsts piled up as MacPhail introduced radio to New York fans, ending a broadcast ban by the three New York teams. Red was at the "mike" for the first televised major league baseball game the 26th of August, 1939. It was televised from Ebbets field to the NBC studios and to the NBC pavilion on the grounds of the New York World's Fair.

For fifteen years the Old Redhead was the voice of the Dodgers and set the standard for baseball broadcasting, contributing to the rise of the Dodger franchise. He witnessed and described the coming of Jackie Robinson to the Dodgers, an event that initially shocked his Southern sensibilities but which in the end he reported as he reported all else, with consummate skill and professionalism.

In 1954 he moved to Yankee Stadium and presided over the decline and fall of that dynasty. In 1961 he made the radio call of the 61st home run by Roger Maris. In 1966 he was fired for having the temerity to report that there only 413 fans present at a late September game. Report what the eye sees.

Following retirement he wrote seven books, penned an occasional piece for the Tallahassee Democrat, and began his second career with National Public Radio. He and his wife Lylah studied Florida History at FSU and pursued several other interests. In his retirement he seldom watched or listened to sports. This had been his life's work, he said, and now he had retired. There were just too many other interesting things to do.

The Monday following his death friends gathered in Tallahassee to pay a final tribute to Red Barber. His ashes were buried in his garden among his beloved Camellias.

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