Heaven Can't Wait

Instead of resting in peace, the great Ted Williams is resting in pieces

by Bob Latham

On a recent business trip to Scottsdale, Arizona, a colleague of mine and I finished our business early. Brainstorming ways to kill the time before our flight back to Dallas, inspiration hit us: "Aren't we close to that cryonics lab where Ted Williams is stored?" Indeed, a quick call confirmed that we were only half a mile away. Thus began a bizarre encounter with life or death—it is unclear which—in the 21st century.

Alcor Life Extension Foundation is housed in a nondescript office park. It was here that John Henry Williams and his sister Claudia chose to preserve the body and head, though reportedly not together, of their father, Ted Williams, after his death in 2002. The decision was made to the horror of Ted's daughter from a previous marriage, Bobby-Jo Williams Ferrell.

Ferrell wanted to cremate her father's body and sprinkle his ashes at sea as requested in Ted's 1997 will. But John Henry and Claudia cited a scrap of paper that had Ted Williams' signature on it, above which was written "JHW, Claudia and dad all agree to be put into biostasis after we die." The scrap of paper bears a date of November 2, 2000.

Whether this document should be given any legal effect, whether the writing above Ted Williams' signature was actually there when he signed the paper, and whether it truly reflected his intent, was the subject of a court battle that Ferrell was forced to abandon when it became too costly. Thus, the "Splendid Splinter" became the "Not-So-Splendidly Splintered"—a body and a head separately cryopreserved with liquid nitrogen in a giant cylinder. Bobby-Jo Ferrell alleged at the time of Ted Williams' death that it was John Henry's intention to cryopreserve their father's body in order to sell his DNA. As Barbaro will hopefully come to realize, there are much better ways of being put out to stud.

Mark Twain once said "I am not an American; I am *the* American." Twain was actually referring to what Frank Fuller, the governor of Utah, had said, but because it fit Twain so perfectly he has been regarded as "the" American of the 19th century. If I had to choose "the" American of the 20th century, it would be Ted Williams. Twain wrote the great American novel. Williams lived the great American novel—he was the greatest hitter in the great American sport.

Like Twain—a novelist, raconteur, newspaperman, steamboat captain and miner—Williams excelled in more than one field. Williams possessed world class skills in three disciplines: baseball, fishing and aviation. He was a decorated fighter pilot in both World War II (after hitting .406 in 1941) and the Korean War. He lost five years of baseball to service for his country, yet still ended his career third on the all-time home run list.

How the 'Splendid Splinter' became the 'Not-So-Splendidly Splintered.'"

Also like Twain—whose writings reflect his life spent in Missouri, California, Connecticut and other places—Williams can't be associated with just one American location. He was raised in San Diego, played baseball in Boston and spent his later years in Florida, where, if his will had been given effect, his ashes would have been scattered off the coast.

If Williams was indeed "the" American of the 20th century, perhaps his greatest mistake was living into the 21st century, where family feuds, legal disputes, dubious notes on scratch paper, thoughts of selling DNA, and suspension of bodies and heads in shared cylinders in office parks have become the order of the day. Twain once quipped, while living in London: "Reports of my death are greatly exaggerated." John Henry and Claudia Williams were apparently hoping this could be their father's epitaph on his tank in Scottsdale.

We had no plans as to what to do upon arrival at Alcor. The door was closed. We rang the bell and a woman came and opened the door. I began to diplomatically explain that we were interested in the operation of their facility. My colleague had a slightly different and less subtle approach: "We're here to see Ted's head," he said. To my everlasting surprise, the woman let us in. As you enter the facility, the pictures of Alcor's 73 cryopreserved "patients" are on the wall with plaques underneath them. Thus, for example, you would see, "John Doe—First Lifecycle 1958–2001." I began to feel like a load of laundry, more than halfway through my own first "cycle."

A few steps into the facility is a mock-up of how a "patient" is cryopreserved. We were then greeted by a man who, if he wasn't the crypt keeper, certainly could have been a stand-in. We asked a few questions. No, we can't see the patients. But yes, we are ideal patients ourselves, with enough tread on our tires in our first "life cycle" to be able to enjoy the fruits of life in the 24th century or whenever we would be reanimated. If we wanted our whole bodies cryopreserved, it would cost a clean $150,000. Just our brains would be a mere $80,000.

It didn't take long before we'd had enough. As we left, the profound sadness of what had happened to the great Ted Williams struck us. This was a man who deserved to have an honorable resting place—somewhere other than being suspended in a tank in a nondescript office park in Scottsdale. ■

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