

## The amazing story of Ralph Hunt Barter - a most remarkable boy from Milborne Port in Somerset



**Ralph Hunt Barter was born in 1872** and was baptised in St John's Church in Milborne Port on 1 June 1873. He was the second of seven children born to John Robert Barter and Martha Hunt. Although John Barter had been born in Corton Denham, as had the couple's first child Hubert, this Barter family had ties to Milborne Port going back to the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, and indeed John's father Charles had been born in the village in 1827. He had later moved to Corton Denham and married there, but by 1871 had returned to Milborne Port and was living on Gainsborough.

2. John Barter, wife Martha and son Hubert moved to Milborne Port just a little later, at about the time of Ralph's birth in the summer of 1872, and by 1881 there were four more Barter children – Gilbert, Caroline, Foster and Ada. The 1881 Census shows the family living in a small, terraced cottage in Baunton's Orchard. The house had almost certainly started out as Number 12, Abbott's Row, though the street was then renamed - and later, in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, all the houses were renumbered as well, so making doubly difficult the identification of the original Barter home. But one thing is certain. Ralph Barter's original home in Milborne Port still stands and remains occupied to this day.

**3.** The 1871 Census shows that by that year, John Barter was already working as a glover, and by 1881 he and his wife were both working in that same industry, as were a large proportion of the residents of Milborne Port. But it took an entry in the United States Federal Census for 1900 to reveal that John had previously visited the America in 1880, and this initial visit probably accounts for what occurred in January 1882. It was then that Martha Barter and her five youngest children arrived in New York City, on board the passenger ship, the *SS Arizona*. Oscar Wilde was on the very same voyage, but whereas he had a first-class cabin, poor Martha and five children spent six nights at sea in Steerage.

**4.** It may well be that head of the family John Barter and eldest son Hubert were already in America, waiting for the rest of the family to arrive. And by May 1882 a seventh child, Lillian, was born in New York, and as later US records and newspapers reveal, this entire Barter family would then make the northern half of New York State home for the rest of their lives. The choice was an obvious one, as St Lawrence County and Fulton County were fast becoming centres for leather production and glove-making, and in fact the town of Gloversville had been born out of the new industry.

**5.** Ralph Barter and his father became the first members of the family to take American citizenship and had done so by 1900. And by that time, some of Ralph's interests had already begun to set him apart. Though the family all remained involved in the gloving industry, Ralph had become increasingly interested in sport, and by the early 1890s had started to excel in one activity in particular. Ralph had taken to American Football and although it was at that time a fairly new and only a semi-professional sport, American Football had taken to him.

**6.** Ralph's football career began in 1892, as a member of the Johnstown YMCA team. Johnstown and nearby Gloversville had already attracted a number of other Somerset families, from Martock, Chard and Yeovil, as well as from Milborne Port. It is clear from Press reports that Ralph, like the rest of the family, grew up schooled in glove-making, and as American Football did not at that time have professional status, having such a trade would have been an important fall-back. But by 1893, Ralph was very much a key part of the YMCA team and his playing position was that of Centre. As the local newspaper the Johnstown Daily Republican reported on 12 October 1893, Ralph was holding well his place on the football field ('the gridiron'), and it was said that he could hold off any Centre an opposing team might field. This was perhaps the first clue that Ralph Barter's footballing skill was actually something special.

7. Others had also started to notice Ralph's footballing skills. In 1895 he moved to the Midwest, to sign for the Chicago Athletic Association team. A spell in Massachusetts with the Boston Athletic Team followed, and then came stints with the Duquesne and Rutland teams in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. And by 1897, Ralph Barter had signed for Ogdensburg, a promising side back in St Lawrence County in New York State. By then, Ralph had switched from his position at Centre and was playing Guard or Tackle, thereby demonstrating that he was a true all-rounder. He was also brave. Reports made it clear that he never wore helmet or nose-guard – perhaps a rather foolhardy thing to do in a sport noted for its brutality, but equally a measure of Ralph's strength and determination.

8. But it wasn't only in American Football that Ralph had started to impress. By 1898 he was Captain of a Johnstown YMCA Basketball Team, and The Johnstown Daily Republican again gushed with praise, referring on 6 May that year to how he was frequently applauded for his alertness and goal-throwing; and was without doubt the best all-round player in the Fulton County section of New York State. Ralph's team finished runners-up for the season and ended it with a 67-0 victory against The Stars of Fort Plain. And although basketball seems to have been a lesser string to Ralph's bow, he was still training others two decades later, and one of his pupils was a Watertown youngster called John Foster Dulles. Dulles went on to become a well-respected basketball player in his own right, before going into politics; becoming President Dwight D Eisenhower's Secretary of State; and lending his name today to Washington's international airport.

9. 1898 also saw Ralph Barter rejoin Johnstown's YMCA football team. Described then in the Press as "the modern Hercules", reports show that Ralph was often seen as the main attraction, and attendances were boosted whenever he played. And for Ralph, the year was about to close on another high note. As if excellence in football and basketball wasn't enough, Ralph had developed a passion for boxing, and during the summer of 1898 had worked as trainer for James Jackson Jeffries. Nicknamed "*The Boilermaker*", Jeffries had already claimed the World Heavyweight Boxing title, which he contested and retained several times through to 1904. Perhaps it was this close contact with one of America's greatest fighters that persuaded Ralph to try for a piece of boxing glory for himself. On 24 December 1898, Ralph headed for the State capital of Albany, and to the Manhattan Club in Troy, to take-on a much-fancied and unbeaten fighter called George Arata. Contemporary Press Reports mention the large contingent of supporters who travelled from Johnstown to support their local hero, and Ralph did not disappoint, delivering a knock-out in only the fourth round.

**10.** Given this success, it is perhaps somewhat surprising that Ralph declined to become a boxing professional, and he was quoted as saying that it was training, and the science behind sport, that was by far his greater interest. But this hadn't stopped Ralph taking-on another famous world champion in two exhibition bouts in October 1898. These were against the legendary Charles '*Kid*' McCoy, then the world middleweight champion. Almost inevitably, it was the fearsome McCoy who prevailed, but in the first bout Ralph actually took the champion to four rounds before defeat – an achievement which then prompted McCoy to take Ralph on as his sparring partner. The partnership appears to have worked well, and in 1899, with McCoy in training for a defence of his title, Ralph – the boy from Milborne Port – was described in the Press as McCoy's '*mentor*'.

**11.** Back on the gridiron, great things were beginning to happen for the Ogdensburg team, and with Ralph as Captain they lifted the Northern New York State Championship in the 1900/01 season, and for the very first time in their history. Soon, other teams were looking to Ralph for success and the following season saw him join the Watertown Red and Black, a New York State football team that was already regarded as being one of America's strongest. Ralph's success and influence on the gridiron continued, and in 1903 he was a key part of the Watertown team that reached the Final of the American Football World Series. The match was played in New York City's Madison Square Garden and Ralph's side finished as runners-up, beaten 12-0 by Franklin Athletic. But even so, this performance had helped bolster the Red and Black's reputation, and the side progressed into the professional era and remains a top-flight side today.

**12.** Ralph Barter married in 1902, adopting wife Mary's daughter from an earlier marriage and then in 1903 becoming father to Ralph Junior. Sadly, their son died a few months later and there were no further children. And with Ralph by then into his 30s, that outstanding football career on the gridiron appears to have come to an end – but not so his training abilities. He remained active in both football and boxing, with the latter including guest appearances in Exhibition matches against other American champions and former champions. Whether sparring, training or in exhibitions, Ralph Barter swapped punches with multiple champions – not just Charles '*Kid*' McCoy but other boxing greats, including James '*The Boilermaker*' Jeffries, Tom '*The Sailor*' Sharkey, Bob '*The Fighting Blacksmith*' Fitzsimmons, '*The Gentleman*' James Corbett and Tommy Ryan.

**13.** Ralph had also qualified a referee and took on that role in both boxing and wrestling matches. One such event took place in Watertown in January 1918, in front of crowd of over a thousand. With Ralph as referee, one-time world champion wrestler Benjamin '*The Physician*' Roller grappled Mort '*The Masked Marvel*' Henderson in three separate bouts spanning several hours. Henderson – famed as the first American ever to don a mask in wrestling competition, and himself a world championship contender – won the first bout; lost the second; and the third was a tie. And before the decade ended, Ralph Barter had also secured a Promoter's Licence, allowing him to put on sporting contests right across the state of New York.

**14.** But away from sport, and by the early 1900s, Ralph had also acquired various business interests, though the start was a costly one. He had advertised for sponsors to enable him to open a gym but soon found himself in financial difficulties, and some backers then sued for the return of their investments. He had also entered into partnership with younger brother Gilbert in a glove-making business, but by 1904 Gilbert had appealed to the New York Supreme Court to bring the partnership to an end. Gilbert had then gone it alone, creating his own gloving and furrier business in Watertown. Meanwhile, Ralph and Mary Barter had created a sporting goods firm in the same town and were trading under the name of '*Barter & Co*'.

**15.** Having opened in 1904, Barter & Co then moved the following year to larger premises at 55 Public Square, right in the centre of Watertown. In so doing, Ralph became owner of a pair of huge cast-iron lions that had been a focal point of the town's centre since the 1870s. Later, Ralph was to sell those lions for \$15,000. And by then, Barter & Co had moved on from being little more than an outlet for sporting goods and had branched-out into trading in many other things. By the 1910s it had in effect become a large department store, selling everything from cameras to motorbikes. The store also specialised in fine leather gloves which were made in its own factory, and with help from other members of what had, by then, become an extended Barter family. Ralph had also by then become something of an inventor, retailing training equipment he himself had designed. So successful was Barter & Co that it eventually became the largest department store in Northern New York State, and its remarkable story was still being told as recently as 2014, when the Northern New York Business Magazine ran a two-page feature which opened with mention of Ralph Barter's humble origins in England.

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Single Cylinder, 4 1/2 h. p. \$250, Formerly \$350.

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Twin Cylinder, in stock, commencing machine, for \$200.

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## BARTER & CO.

55  
PUBLIC SQUARE

Above: An advertisement from 1911

16. However, Barter & Co struggled to survive financially much beyond the 1910s. It had been taken over by Creditors in 1921 and although the Barter family continued to maintain day-to-day control, the Wall Street Crash of 1929 undermined the business further and it closed for good just two years later. As for Ralph, he remained a prominent figure in Watertown and only went into retirement after being widowed in 1942. He died in 1957, having failed to recover completely from an attack carried out in his own home, in 1955, by a drunken 20 year-old Canadian.

17. Interviewed upon his retirement from the sport, another famous American boxer by the name of George Bush, and who had been sparring partner to the legendary boxing champion John L Sullivan, remarked that Ralph Barter had delivered him the hardest punch he ever received. It had fractured Bush's jaw in three places. Described elsewhere as a man-mountain; and a six-footer weighing over 200 pounds, Ralph Hunt Barter undoubtedly made his mark on sport in the United States, and is still remembered in Watertown today, not least by those who have studied, supported or played for the local Red and Black team.

**18.** It clearly was America, and the opportunities his move there afforded him, that turned Ralph Barter from Milborne Port into a true sporting hero - a legend among those who followed American football and world champion boxing in particular. However, Ralph's contributions to basketball and wrestling should not be overlooked, and it was said that he was equally adept in the field sports of hammer and shot. But the inescapable truth is that Ralph, like his family for generations, was Somerset born and bred.

**19.** Milborne Port may now lay valid claim to its very own, home-grown American sporting giant - a Baunton's Orchard boy made good, and proudly remembered today by Barter descendants on both sides of the Atlantic.

## ***In Memory of Ralph Hunt Barter, 1872-1957***

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***Researched and written by:***

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