

My Emlen Tunnell Story

By David Lyons

I grew up listening to stories told by my father, Bill Lyons, about his friend Emlen Tunnell, and we were both always amazed that a biography was never written about him. After considerable reflection and a push from my dad, I decided that I would take that journey and write about our local legend's life, so that more people would know about his remarkable life story. The American public knows plenty about sports heroes like Jackie Robinson and Hank Aaron, but few remember or have even heard of Emlen Tunnell. He is a forgotten star who pioneered his way into the NFL in an uncharacteristic way at the time; he went to the New York Giants office and asked for a tryout. Dozens of books have been written about Jackie Robinson and Vince Lombardi, but none have ever been written about the great Emlen "the Gremlin" Tunnell, who most friends called "Em."

Emlen Tunnell wasn't merely a legendary football player, he was a highly charismatic real person who was kind to his family and friends. He became a part of my childhood because my dad would share delightful stories around our dinner table with me and my six brothers. Dad was a neighbor and friend of Emlen's. One of the stories Dad shared with us was how Emlen was moved to tears when a group of homeless guys took up a collection for him when the New York Giants held an Emlen Tunnell Day in 1958. The money collected was less than \$30, but Emlen said, "These guys probably gave me all the money they had, and who can ever be more generous than that?"

Emlen was a very sensitive and sentimental guy who wore his heart on his sleeve and would tear up rather easily when he felt moved. In hearing stories about him, I learned how a person built a reputation over time by the way they treated others. Emlen was special, and he made my Dad feel special, too. Emlen's genius was not just football, he had amazing people skills. He knew how to make friends and cultivate friendships.

After embarking on writing Emlen's biography, I quickly learned that many other Garrett Hillians – people from Emlen's neighborhood – felt the same way about Emlen as did his family and friends, his shipmates from the Coast Guard, his teammates and friends from the University of Iowa, his teammates and coaches of the New York Giants, the Mara family that owns the team, Vince Lombardi and Emlen's teammates on the Green Bay Packers, as well as everyday people like cab drivers, truck drivers, waiters, waitresses, and many sports figures and celebrities.

The life and times of this forgotten legend make up a warm-hearted story about a person who loved to play sports as much as he loved to have lifelong friendships. The reader learns many life lessons by seeing first-hand how Emlen approached life, created opportunities, and saw challenges as problem-solving exercises. He was proactive and would go after things other people would not, from asking the New York Giants for a tryout, to seeking the most adventurous way to spend a night in New York City or any town. From the most famous celebrity down to the cab drivers, he was known for how effortlessly he generated a good time.

"He could create magic anywhere he went," Jerry Kramer of the Green Bay Packers fame told me. Jerry explained how his friend "Em" as many of his friends called him, helped him enjoy a

Ray Charles concert by sitting with his football pal and a couple other friends, next to Ray's piano on stage. Ray Charles even played some of Jerry's song choices during his concert.

Emlen interacted with people from all walks of life and enjoyed whoever he was with. He lived in the moment with passion and humility. As L.A. Rams great Rosey Grier told me, Emlen would always say to him, "I'm going to live fast and die young. Em did live life fast and he knew how to enjoy life and people. He always put a smile on my face. Emlen was a beautiful human being."

The overwhelming majority of people I interviewed told me how special Emlen made them feel. I was moved by how much love people expressed for Emlen and how so many people easily remember him fondly many years after he passed. Their admiration was essentially his legacy. "Wow, Em Tunnell!" person after person would say.

"Just talking about him after all the years makes me smile from ear to ear," said Bob Lurtsema, who played for the New York Giants when Emlen was an assistant coach. "Believe me, people who know me know I would not hold back with my criticism, but Em Tunnell was a special, special person who I really loved. He was a great person."

The small idyllic town of Garrett Hill where Emlen grew up was an exceptional place, a unique town that was integrated going back to the 1930's. Garrett Hill had ethnicities from many backgrounds who got along as well as human beings could. As Emlen's sister "Goodie" said, "We had to stick together and help each other, we were too poor in a sense to have racial problems, because we had to survive. The way we interacted really helped us to thrive during the tough economic times after the Depression and during World War II," she told me. "We were very united."

Fortunately, I was able to interview Emlen's family and some childhood friends over many years and this helped me discover the themes and patterns of Emlen's life and gave me a unique ability to describe his hometown life. Most writers and journalists only get a quick snapshot of a person or a place, but since I grew up in the same small town it gave me an insider's perspective, and presented me with an opportunity to listen to people who wanted to talk about Emlen. They were not self-conscious talking to me since I spoke to them many times over the years. Thank goodness, my patience paid off and I accumulated a library of audio recordings of many interviews with people from all walks of life who knew him well. In addition, I interviewed his friends from high school, shipmates from the Coast Guard, teammates and friends from the University of Iowa, and teammates and friends from both the New York Giants and the Green Bay Packers.

By the summer of 2016, I had been working on my Emlen Tunnell biography for over four years, and in that time, several friends of Emlen's that I had been interviewing and gotten to know had sadly passed away. Then, all of sudden, Emlen's sister Vivian, who the family and friends called "Goodie," had a tragic setback, because up until then she had exceptional health and vitality. Goodie had a delightful personality. Even at 94, she carried herself with a sense of elegance and sophistication, yet would not shy away from sharing her toughness and would enliven the room when sharing some of her recollections with great details. Goodie was a charming story teller with a sharp wit and she had plenty stories to share. Unfortunately, she passed away suddenly, within three months of becoming ill. Goodie's daughter Catherine had been living with her mother for several

years, and was in ill health. She has an ailment that makes it difficult to get around. She debated paying nurses for twenty-four-hour home care or moving to an assisted living facility. Homecare sounded like too much work and responsibility, so she decided to sell their home, because she was not able to live on her own, without her mother, who assisted her by cooking and driving her around town, even when Goodie was 94 years of age. After Catherine moved into Presbyterian Village, an assisted living residence in Rosemont, she put her house up for sale. Her new home is located on the old Cassatt Estate, a place where her Uncle Emlen had played, swam in their swimming pool with many of his Garrett Hill buddies, picked pillowcase loads of fruits from the orchards, and enjoyed many moments of great adventure, fun, and belly laughter. Ironically, his niece Catherine is now living on the same estate where they both had fond childhood memories of exploration and fun. Over the years and many, many interviews, I became close friends with Catherine and her mother. After her move, she was dealing with lots of sadness due to her mother's passing, selling the home where she had so many memories with her mother, and now adjusting to a new type of living in an assisted living facility. Catherine is strong, and she has a winning spirit like her Uncle Em. Weeks after she moved into the Presbyterian Village, I visited Catherine. To help brighten her spirit, I brought along my nine-year-old son Ethan, who wore his top hat and brought along his magic case. Ethan enjoyed entertaining her with magic tricks, then we had a nice talk. When we said our goodbyes, Catherine informed me that she told the movers to leave one box for her friend in California – that was me. She said she asked her church friend Andre Williams to meet me at the house the next day to give me the box.

“What’s in the box?” I asked

“Some books and things of my Uncle Emlen, that my mother and I thought you would like.”

“That is quite an honor, Catherine,” I said.

“My mom and I agreed on this some time ago.” Catherine replied.

“Thank you, so much.”

The next day, my dad, my son and I went and met Andre at Goodie and Catherine’s home nearby in Haverford. He let us into the dining room where there was the big box that Catherine wanted me to have. We talked a little then thanked Andre and left.

We went back to my dad’s house, in Garrett Hill. My six brothers and I grew up in this house that he purchased in early 1950’s. It was a very short distance from the house where my father grew up on Eachus Avenue, very close to Emlen’s childhood home on Garrett Avenue. When I started to look through the box that Catherine had given me, I could not believe what I saw. There was Emlen’s silver life-saving medal given to him posthumously in 2011 at Coast Guard Island, plus other breathtaking memorabilia he had achieved from the University of Iowa, and the Coast Guard. I set each piece up in my dad’s living room; I was speechless and moved with the honor I had been bestowed. I had been entrusted with the most sentimental memories of a forgotten legend, Catherine’s “Uncle Emlen,” the one who helped her mother when she was giving birth. I felt blessed to have been considered a friend and to have had many great conversations with Emlen’s beloved relatives. I believe that I was gifted these items because both Goodie and Catherine understood and respected how much I wanted Emlen’s memory to stay alive.

After reviewing Emlen's memorabilia with my father that afternoon, we both thought that it would be best to have the displayed at the Sports Legends of Delaware County Museum, at the Radnor Township building, which had recently had their grand opening. My Dad had gotten to know the curator, Jim Vankoski, after he participated in a Comcast documentary for Black History Month titled, "The Garrett Hill Pioneer," about Emlen Tunnell. My dad and I were extremely moved by Catherine's generosity and trust in me and my dad, and I wanted to make sure that the items stayed together at their museum, allowing the public to remember Emlen as a war hero and an outstanding athlete. Consequently, I felt a load of responsibility, and as a good steward of the collection, it was my responsibility to make sure that Emlen's collection stayed intact.

Time was of the essence, since I was returning to California the next day. The next morning, I called Jim Vankoski, the curator of the Sports Legends, and told him that I had some Emlen Tunnell items that I thought he would be very interested in for the museum.

"No way!" Jim exclaimed. "I have been trying to get some of his memorabilia from over 10 years."

"Well Jim, you are going to like what you see, like how he was a war hero."

"Well, you know that would be unbelievable because we are talking to the Radnor Township Board of Commissioners about raising money for a seven-foot bronze statue of Emlen."

"Oh, Jim, I think I have some items that should impress the Board of Commissioners," I said. "I'll see you at 12:00."

We met around lunch time. I got to meet Jim as well as Phil Damiani, the vice-president of the Museum, and they gave me a tour of their very impressive and extensive collection of sports memorabilia from the great athletes of Delaware County: those who won medals in the Olympics; major league baseball superstars like Mickey Vernon; and NFL stars like Emlen Tunnell. The showcases and the items were very impressive and I was delighted to see how the memories of the highly accomplished sports legends were kept alive, making a lasting imprint on all the Radnor Township youngsters who visited. Unfortunately, I had to shorten the tour, because I had a flight to catch within hours. I brought in the big box from my dad's car and we set up in a conference room. As we looked at each Emlen Tunnell item, Jim and Phil were astounded at what they were seeing. They admitted that they were blown away with the items that highlighted Emlen's achievements in the U.S. Coast Guard and on the football field. They told my dad and I about the idea of the Emlen Tunnell Bronze Statue Project and we knew that this was the perfect museum to house and display our forgotten legend's memory. When I learned that Jim Vankoski, Phil Damiani, and Rich Pagano were the co-chairs for the Emlen Tunnell Statue Committee, I was ecstatic to hear this news that they were doing their very best to keep his legacy alive by starting a fundraising campaign and commissioning a great local sculptor to create a bigger than life representation Emlen. I was inspired even more to continue on my journey of writing about our friend and local legend.

On the airplane ride home, I reflected on what had happened over the last 48 hours. I felt very blessed to have been entrusted with Emlen's memorabilia. I left these items in Jim's care with the sense that serendipity was in play, and I felt Emlen's spirit and good fortune was helping us along on this legacy project. I was thrilled that there were people like Jim and Phil dedicating so much of their time to help keep the memories of these great local legends alive. I hoped the items

would help convince the Board of Commissioners to vote on building the bronze statue of Emlen. I told Jim that bronze statue idea was a fantastic idea, because it would help the citizens of Radnor Township and all those who visit the museum, understand what a heroic human being “Em” was, a hero on and off the football field, a hero when his shipmates needed him, and a hero who always remained loyal to his hometown friends of Garrett Hill despite his stardom. I thanked Jim and Phil for helping people learn about terrific human beings who were such nice people, not just athletic stars. When I spoke with MM1c Fred Shaver, who is 94 and still in good health, regarding the Emlen Tunnell bronze statue, he said, “Oh, that is wonderful. That is great!” Mr. Shaver is the shipmate who Emlen rescued after their ship was torpedoed and the engine room exploded.

The reason I have spent so many years writing a biography on Emlen Tunnell is, unfortunately, because he has been long forgotten and I had to contact as many people who knew Emlen who were still alive, because I needed to hear from as many first-hand accounts that I could find to write the most accurate account of his life. My hope and intention is to keep his memory alive for future generations, and I want to highlight the fact that Emlen Tunnell was both a champion on the football field and on the field of life.

Amazingly, two major Emlen Tunnell legacy events have begun since I started working on his biography. The first is Sports Legends of Delaware County Museum’s, brainstorming and promoting a project to get a seven-foot bronze statue of Emlen Tunnell. The second event is the United States Coast Guard announcing that a new Sentinel-Class Fast Response Cutter, a beautiful state of the art new ship is being named in Emlen Tunnell’s honor and is scheduled to be delivered in 2021. The Emlen Tunnell Statue Dedication Ceremony is scheduled for Saturday, June 2 at 2:00 at the Radnor Township Municipal Building. It is expected to be crowded so parking will be off site at 555 Lancaster Avenue and a shuttle will be provided to the Emlen Tunnell Dedication. Please come by and celebrate the memory of a wonderful local legend.

David Lyons has been working on the biography of Emlen Tunnell for the past six years. He expects the biography to be completed by the end of 2018. He was a guest speaker for the United States Coast Guard during Black History Month and he gave a speech about the remarkable life of Emlen Tunnell. If you have any information you would like to share with him regarding Emlen Tunnell, please contact him at djlyons@me.com