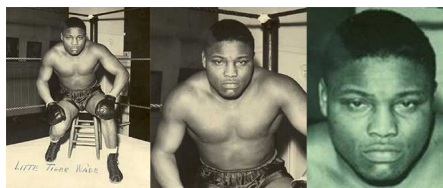


## Battle Hymn - Part 5: Blind Tiger

Written by Springs Toledo  
Thursday, 03 April 2014 09:00

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Until the middle of World War II, San Francisco was among the most integrated cities in the United States. Unlike Chicago and other big cities, there were no ghettos; no plans to stack black people on top of each other to keep them at a distance and conserve space. Sociologists believe this was because they had not yet arrived en masse to threaten the status quo.

Aaron Wade was one of thousands of single African American men trickling into San Francisco before World War II. He and they mixed in with other groups emigrating from outside the United States to create a truly cosmopolitan city where cultural traits from cuisine to speech patterns were regularly exchanged. This was especially so in the Fillmore section of the city: “Day or night,” said the WPA’s guide to the city in 1940, “pass laughing Negroes, dapper Filipino boys, pious old Jews on their way to *schule*, sturdy-legged Japanese high school girls, husky American longshoremen out for a quiet stroll with the wife and kids.”

This idyllic multiculturalism was put to the wind like pixie dust after Japan bombed Pearl Harbor in 1941. To the dismay of many then and now, President Franklin Roosevelt proved to be no friend to Japanese citizens. He signed an executive order authorizing the physical removal of all of them from the West Coast. Signs were posted around San Francisco setting the deadline for April 7. On the foggy morning of April 8, the area between Geary and Pine Streets known as “Little Osaka” and “Japantown” looked like the Rapture. Japanese businesses were boarded up and empty houses loomed on empty streets. The residents were bussed to “war relocation centers” in Topaz, Utah.

In 1940, Wade was one of only 4,846 African Americans living in San Francisco. After Roosevelt gave Japanese Americans the federal boot, throngs in the old slave states packed their things and headed west. They were encouraged by a surplus of freed-up real estate and the bright prospect of finding work in wartime industry. By 1950 there were 43,460 blacks in the city, an increase of nearly 800%.

Wade was still renting his room on McAllister Street in the Fillmore in the early forties. Then known as “second-hand row,” McAllister Street was “spicy with the odors of delicatessen shops, bakeries, and restaurants,” according to the WPA, and merchants and customers parleyed in

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any number of languages all day. It was “a gourmet’s paradise” which proved to be one reason why the Little Tiger got “roly-poly.” He married Gertrude “Jenny” Johnson and a son, Harvey Dexter Wade, was born in September. Wade soon moved his new family into larger quarters a few blocks closer to Fillmore Street. He should have went in the other direction. Fillmore Street was where the action was —and where a family man shouldn’t be.

When the sun went down, old gospel songs would drift out of church windows and Wade, passing merrily by, might have had his conscience poked. But probably not. Despite the fact that he was only two generations removed from slavery, he hadn’t a care in the world or concern about the next. He was headed toward the entertainment scene, where Jazz Clubs like Jimbo’s Bop City had jam sessions that lasted into the wee hours and featured guests like Count Basie and Ella Fitzgerald. His hang-outs were creep joints that catered to carousers with too much time on their hands and no reason to get up early.

It wasn’t always fun.

A little before midnight on December 26, 1943, a gunshot sent patrons at an all-night café on Fillmore Street scrambling for the door. Wade stepped out of a booth gripping his left shoulder, which was bleeding. Jack Chase had shot him. The police arrived to the café to find Chase swearing it was accidental; he said his gun discharged when he reached into his coat for cigarettes. His live-in girlfriend and Wade both supported the story, but Chase was arrested and held at city prison for assault with intent to commit murder, possession of a deadly weapon, and filing the serial numbers off his .32 caliber pistol. Wade went to the hospital.

Six months later the two drinking buddies were in opposite corners of an Oakland ring. “Chase elected to stand and slug it out with Wade for eight rounds,” said the *Oakland Tribune*. “It was a mistake.” He was thrashed like a rag doll until the last round when he landed a punch to Wade’s eye and Wade, temporarily blinded, twisted and began pawing at it. Surrender came in the last round. The ringside physician later said that his optic nerve had been paralyzed. Chase had either landed a lucky punch or “heeled” him, that is, rubbed the laces of his glove on Wade’s eyes. Wade’s sight returned after a little while, though the damage proved permanent.

Chase did not emerge unscathed; Muller said he “wasn’t right” for weeks afterward. Chase seldom said much about his opponents, but Wade’s power astonished him. He would say that no one ever hit him harder. “That boy can really punch,” Chase said. “No one can take chances with him. If they do, they may regret it.”

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Wade found himself neck-deep in Murderers' Row over the next four months. He broke even; but before anyone would think his partying days were over, he took his purse money and opened a night club. Located at 1640 Post Street, the "Gay Paree" was on the site of the now-vacant Fuji Transfer Company and featured an orchestra and plenty of booze. It opened in October 1944—on Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>. Three days later it was raided by the police for operating without a liquor license. Wade appeared in court and paid a fine; then the real trouble began.

Word on the street said that gamblers had been approaching main event fighters with bribes to fix fights. Wade was subpoenaed.

On April 11, 1945, he appeared before the grand jury to testify about what he knew. The following day he showed up at the district attorney's office unannounced. It wasn't the first time.

District Attorney Edmund "Pat" Brown had an office at the Hall of Justice on Kearney Street. Alan Wade told me that Brown was a boxing fan who went to the fights at the Winterland and the Bucket of Blood and had a soft spot for the Little Tiger. When Wade ran out of money, which was often, he would head over to Brown's office for a loan. Eventually, Brown had to shut him off for nonpayment.

When Wade showed up at Brown's office on April 12, it wasn't for a handout. He had a proposition that was, said Brown, "the most remarkable one I have received since I have been district attorney." Wade said that "if the investigation of the crooked fights was dropped," he would "guarantee there would be no more 'fixed fights' on this side of the bay." Brown turned it down cold and informed the fighter that the investigation would continue. He might have also told him to walk it off.

"He was always a drinker, but it got worse around mid-career," Alan told me. He'd go on binges, sometimes when he should have been training. In a sport that attracted gamblers with bank rolls and every other kind of shark and hustler—in a racket where you had to be sharp to protect your money, reputation, and future, Wade's judgment was regularly impaired. Given that he had a family to support, co-owned a club that was springing leaks, and had a tough time getting enough fights to support his night life, he was an easy mark to begin with. Whether Wade was directly involved in fixing fights is unknown. Was his proposition to the district attorney made on behalf of a third party? Was it a booze-induced delusion? The record is as hazy as the fighter

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on a Saturday night.

We know that others beside him were summoned to appear before the grand jury. One witness, also a boxer, admitted that he had received threatening phone calls. "They tell me I had better get out of town," he said under oath, "or change my testimony." A main-eventer like Wade certainly knew what was going on behind the scenes. He also knew the risks of singing about it. When he testified under oath, he said nothing worth reporting, but then he went to Brown's office and said too much. When it hit the papers, he may have panicked.

On April 17, the *San Francisco Chronicle* reported Wade as "missing from his usual haunts."

In May, a black trainer and the white owner of the Brown Bomber Dance Hall in the Fillmore District were indicted. Brown had evidence that they had acted on behalf of shadowy figures from Brooklyn who had come to San Francisco to put fights in the bag.

Soon after those indictments were announced, Wade left his family behind and hightailed it east.

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Special thanks to Alan Roy Wade.

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