Written by Springs Toledo
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*Cocoa Kid's father...soon before his disappearance at sea.*

**“JUST WATCH MAH SMOKE,”** Part 1: Lost at Sea

In 1901, a nine-year-old went missing in Georgia. “Negro Boy Disappeared from His Home on July 28,” ran a headline in the *Atlanta Constitution*. After eleven days his mother was beside herself and the police were still searching. We know that the boy was eventually found because at seventeen he was living with his parents and driving a truck for his father’s transfer company. His name was Lewis Hardwick. It would not be the last time he went missing.

The sea called to him. Hardwick became a sailor living a life of scenic drudgery. In 1914, he

was on liberty in Mayaguez, a western seaport in Puerto Rico where mango trees are everywhere and blacks are the majority. While there, he met a young woman who would become his wife. Her name was Myrtice Arroyo. She gave birth to a son on May 2nd 1914. Not long afterwards, Hardwick brought his new family to Atlanta and eventually moved them into a small house -not much more than a shack, and got a job as a porter on Auburn Avenue. The sea, the irresistible sea, called to him again and he enlisted in the United States Navy. The world was at war when he did.

He worked as a mess attendant in the galley of a ship assigned to the South Atlantic. “Messmen” were almost invariably African American in a still-segregated military. Hardwick probably kept to himself, absorbing and avoiding the scuttlebutt of the white officers he served. He took his own meals standing up. His quarters were dank and cramped and it is not difficult to imagine him there, alone, reaching into his sea bag for a book. Pressed between its pages he would find a small photograph that made his heart ache.

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The U.S.S. *Cyclops* was a 522 foot, 19,000 ton steamship commissioned by the Navy after the United States entered World War I. Captain George W. Worley was a German sympathizer notorious for his cantankerous disposition and the routine abuse of his crew. Bound for Baltimore from Brazil with a cargo of manganese ore, the ship made an unauthorized stop at Barbados on March 5th 1918. Worley issued a request ashore to the U.S. Consul for 600 tons of coal and additional supplies, though the reason why is not clear. The Consul distrusted Worley and his suspicions grew when he found many Germanic names on the ship’s manifest.

The next day a long, low blast of the horn signaled the departure of the Cyclops. It raised anchor, left port, and transmitted a message -“Weather fair. All well.”

After March 6th the ship was never seen or heard from again.

No distress call was communicated. No debris was found. No German ships, submarines, or mines were in the area. Not one of the 306 men on board ever turned up anywhere. The Navy launched an exhaustive search at sea and a decade-long investigation to no avail. The U.S.S. Cyclops disappeared in the heart of what is now known as the Bermuda Triangle.

The government released the names of all crew and passengers to American newspapers a month after the disappearance. Hardwick’s eldest son was three years old when his mother frantically scanned the Atlanta Constitution on the morning of April 15th 1918. There on page three, column three, she read the name “Hardwick, Lewis Herbert” among the lost.

This time, he was never found. He was twenty-six years old.

Myrtice Hardwick died soon after that.

These were the first memories of an orphan named for his father, Herbert Lewis Hardwick… *Co coa Kid*

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SWEET AUBURN
Antonia Arroyo was his aunt. According to the 1930 U.S. Census, she was born in Puerto Rico (almost certainly in Mayaguez) before moving to Georgia with her husband, a black American by the name of E.A. Robinson. They raised nephews Lewis and his younger brother Jimmy alongside a half-dozen other children in Brunswick before moving into a modest-sized home on Auburn Avenue. Only a stone’s throw away, Martin Luther King Jr. was born on a winter’s day in 1929.

Auburn Avenue is a one mile thoroughfare where the black community built up businesses, organizations (including the Atlanta chapter of the NAACP), a hotel, churches, entertainment spots like the Paramount, and a heritage that prompted John Wesley Dobbs to call it the “richest Negro street in the world.” During the Roaring Twenties, it was the hub of Black Atlanta, where bootstraps and a can-do attitude lifted many. *Sweet Auburn*, they called it.

When his nephew was a skin-and-bones adolescent in 1928, Robinson took him to a boxing gym. Lewis, as the boy was called, walked in and was greeted by the stench of sweat, resin, and wet leather. He was probably too self-conscious to wince, too spellbound by a spectacle that was, by the standards of the Deep South, remarkable. No hats were in hand here. Strong black men were conditioning themselves for battle, their arms lashing out at shadows. Fists beat drum rhythms on leather bags and pounded sacks hanging on chains. Skip ropes snapped on the floor and whirled so fast he couldn’t see them.

*Ropes*. White mobs in Georgia had already lynched well over 400 black men by 1928, and a dangling noose was their symbol of terror. Sometimes they used guns. A Morehouse College student was delivering newspapers around the same time that Lewis first went to the gym. The student did not remove his cap when collecting the monthly bill from a white store owner. The store owner shot him in the back and killed him. The murder was ignored.

Ropes here surrounded a ring, stretching tautly around a square deal and a fair fight. This was a place where violence was re-imagined in the midst of violence, where self-determination was captured in the fists of the oppressed –in the blessed fists. Blacks weren’t allowed to fight whites in the south yet but that didn’t matter. They could pretend.

And they could make money. They could make money and raise the ire of the whites like Jack Johnson did; or they could make money and raise awareness like Tiger Flowers, whose mansion stretched to heaven over on Simpson Road.

Lewis stood wide-eyed and took it all in. He found what he was looking for here among leather and stink. In no time at all, his skinny arms were splitting lips and stretching necks in sparring sessions. His uncle peered through those ropes with his own neck stretched. Managing this kind of natural talent, he must have mused, would sure beat managing a sandwich shop.

Monday night was fight night at Elk’s Rest, “a colored establishment” on Edgewood Avenue. Promoters jockeyed to put on “all-colored” boxing shows and sold tickets at shops lining Auburn

Avenue. Ladies were admitted free with a male escort and refunds were typically offered to anyone not completely satisfied with the card. A section was reserved for the white folks who wanted to attend. Battles royal opened the shows. These unseemly relics from the days of slavery saw eight or twelve African-American boys (“darktown huskies” according to one account), no older than Lewis, wildly swinging at each another for coins tossed into the ring. Sometimes they were blindfolded.

Lewis was a fourteen-year-old featherweight when he had his first professional fight. It was scheduled for four rounds and was over in two. In no time at all, he had cut Kid Moon to ribbons, put D.W. Jackson to sleep, and scored another three knockouts in his first seven bouts.

Then the sea beckoned him as it had his father. The athletic commission probably beckoned him first after finding out he was underage. Lewis and his uncle boarded a ship for Puerto Rico in the summer of 1930. He had at least one fight there in Mayaguez -the city where he was born. It wasn’t until late October when he packed his bags and headed back to the port in San Juan. He lied about his birth date to appear eighteen, gave his address as “310½ Auburn Av. Atlanta Ga.,” and took a seat among forty-seven other passengers as the ship departed for the states. There, on board the S.S. *Ponce, alongside Fuentes*, *Garcia*, *Gonzalez*, and *Jimenez* sa t “
*Hardwick, Herbert L*
.” like a fly in Spanish soup.

The Fates were winking at him. The Cyclops was in the news again with another theory purporting to explain its disappearance, and the Ponce sailed into the heart of the Bermuda Triangle.

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CHECK BACK SOON FOR PART 2 OF 8.

The photograph opening this essay is found in the *Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture / General Research and Reference Division, New York Public Library*
. The author is Kelly Miller (1863-1939) and the subject is Lewis H. Hardwick –the father of Cocoa Kid.

The following sources were used for this essay: *Atlanta Constitution*; the 1910, 1920, and 1930 U.S. *Census reports*; *The Messman Chronicles: African Americans in the U.S. Navy, 1932-1943*
by Richard E. Miller; the writings of Gian J. Quasar regarding the disappearance of the U.S.S. Cyclops;
*Officers and Enlisted Men of the United States Navy Who Lost Their Lives during the World War*
–published by the Government Printing Office;
*A Clashing of the Soul: John Hope and the Dilemma of African American Leadership and Black Higher Education in the Early Twentieth Century*
by Leroy Davis; and the ship manifest of the S.S. Ponce, 1930.

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Comment on this article

**brownsugar says:**

wow some serious research went into this peice.. nice work.

**Radam G says:**

NICE to the 19 power. S-To's investigative, pugilistic masterweaving is beaming out to be read like a powerful light coming from a grand lightower. Enough said! Holla!

**Robert Curtis says:**

Good piece, Springs. I was about to Like it on Facebook. Should I have? My favorite website got smaller while everything else got bigger.

**JRein says:**

Springs Toledo's found The Lost Dutchman mine 'n The Dead Sea Scrolls.

He revers the game 'n NEVER stops digging.

Can't wait ta read the rest of this series.

**joejennette says:**

what is the exact birthdate of Lewis Herbert Hardwick? you said in 1901 he was 9 years old...with all that research can you confirm his exact birth date...it is a great story...hope to have more on the family of Hardwick

**SpringsT says:**

Sure, Lewis Herbert Hardwick was born on October 8, 1891.

Part 1: Lost at Sea**joejennette says:**

Lewis Herbert Hardwick was born on October 8, 1891...he does not exist in the 1930 Census...are you talking about his family because you stat that his wife Myrtice Hardwick died right after his death when he was twenty-six years old. Can you suppy me the with 1930 Census that you list as one of your sources...and also can you tell me where you got the information about his life and marriage and also his son the boxer. I know you listed the sources below can you tell me the exact source where you got the story of the sailor father having a son

who become the great coco kid. I'm a historian and genealogist for over 25 years and quite interested in this subject and my passion is war hero's and my love is boxing.

**SpringsT says:**

Lewis Hardwick, the father of Cocoa Kid, is not on the 1930 Census because he disappeared at sea in 1918. He can be found on the 1900 Census in Fulton County, Atlanta, GA at age 8. He had a draft card dated June 6, 1917. E.A. Robinson can be found on the 1930 Census -he is the uncle of the fighter, living on Auburn Avenue in Atlanta, GA. Cocoa Kid's seaman father and Puerto Rican mother are revealed in the Holyoke Daily Transcript and Telegram, 5/24/33.