

Ballpark: Camden Yards and the Building of an American Dream

by Peter Richmond

From Chapter Nine: Red and Green

“Everybody thinks because a guy’s a bricklayer, [and] you work with your back, you’re stupid,” Charlie Smith says with a shake of the head one August day, and while it is true that he is broad backed, and possesses a handshake that features bunches of muscle and tendon born of decades of hefting the hardened-clay blocks, Charlie Smith is also not lacking in intelligence. He talks a great deal, of a great many things, most of them made of brick, in the confident tones of a man giving a lecture. Men will do this when they’ve practiced one craft for thirty years and have had ample time to think about it.

Charlie Smith speaks in logic as unassailable, as carefully assembled, as the wall of perfect red Maryland brick in front of which he is standing.

“When a house bums down, what’s standing?” It is a riddle not unlike the Sphinx’s. Charlie Smith seems to endow it with a great deal of significance. He has an earnestly ruddy complexion born of three decades of bricklaying in the sun and wind.

He waits for an answer, can’t wait any longer.

“The chimney,” he says, with a satisfied nod. And he’s right. “See, the beauty of brick is it’s there, and it’s there for all time. It gives you this individual pride. Instead of boxed walls...When you drive by the site, you say, ‘I worked there.’ You can’t take it away.”

Charlie Smith stops.

“Unless you blow it up.”

We are strolling the grounds of the park on a warm and windy July afternoon. We are on the Russell Street side, the third-base side, where the wall of brick has been finished. On this day, Smith’s crew is working on the wall on the other side, down the right-field side, heading inexorably, a dozen feet a day, toward the warehouse. Charlie is showing me the work they’ve already done. Charlie’s talking brick. It’s his favorite subject. He backs up his talk too; in his basement room at home Charlie built a fireplace and put brick on each side of it, up to a height of four feet, and then laid wainscoting above it. The opposing wall is mirrored, so it looks as if it’s brick too. Charlie puts his brick where his mouth is.

Charlie Smith is the on-site foreman for Baltimore Masonry. Since 1963 he’s been a member of the Bricklayers and Allied Craftsmen of Maryland Local One. It’s a brick town — used to be, anyway. Camden Yards, with all of its bricks being fired right over in Westernport, has brought back a little of the glory.

And there is glory in brick, certainly in Baltimore. If you doubt it, ask Charlie Smith. It doesn't take a fine eye to see that there is glory on this job. When it's finished, Camden Yards will feature 600,000 bricks — most of them ornamental, like a curtain hung flat in front of a wall, but inspiring nonetheless.

The job is full of detail; thirty different kinds of custom brick were fired in local kilns to build this park — two kinds of bullnose (thumbnail and toenail), stacked bond, running bond, circle arches, jack arches. Thirty different bricks. That speaks of plenty of detail. That is a good thing for Smith's crews, for monotony is the mason's enemy. He was pleased to discover, he said, that the Camden Yards job was quite full of variations on the usual theme, which is generally, well, just a wall. That's how bricklayers refer to themselves when they're at work — "on the wall."

"I told them, 'Don't be afraid to design curved, serpentine,'" Smith says, of a conversation with the architects. "If you do this day in and day out it gets monotonous. If the bricklayer's got detail work to do, he's happy. Besides, if you do too much of one thing it's no good. It'll look like a fucking dungeon. But what if you come up with wainscotted brick? The distressed paneling? The arches? You break it up.

"This is a Roman arch," he tells me. "The same type of arch at Pompeii."

At our feet is an arched wooden mold. It is inserted into the opening, the bricks are laid above it, and when they harden, the mold is pulled out.

We continue our stroll. Charlie moves swiftly and surely, despite some girth. Everyone on a construction site moves with agility; there's always the chance they'll have to get out of the way of something quickly.

"Look at the houses today," he says. "They don't want to give you brick. A wooden porch, I had to paint it three times. Brick ain't like painting. You don't have to paint every year when you're using brick. Brick looks good with landscaping, too. When you got your green against your brick? When that brick gets washed, and they put in some grass and shrubbery — bingo."

I ask Smith about old bricks and new bricks. New bricks, he says, are generally wire cut now — a sheet of brick is cut up into its rectangles by a wire grid.

"Years ago," he says, "the bricks were softer. Now they're harder, and if you break them, there's a ragged edge. The new mortars are definitely stronger. You go over to Russia, they have façade nets. The bricks are all dropping off."

Charlie Smith lives for extolling the job, for extolling the union, but mostly extolling the brick. He has earned the privilege. He won a Building Congress Award for craftsmanship a few years back for his brickwork on the Fort Meade School, off state Route 175. The award means everything to him.

“Now they’re gonna know my name,” he says. And what more does anyone really want? No one knew his grandfather’s name. His grandfather was a miner who lost his lungs and his life in the mines of northern England. His father welded warships in this town during the forties, when the docks in Baltimore turned out a ship every month. Charlie Smith has been a mason in Baltimore since 1963, and he believes in his work. He believes in his material. He bemoans the passing of his craft, and of brick itself.

“Everybody thinks a union is bad,” he tells me. “In the meantime, we’re taking a cut. Union-wise, this country, it doesn’t take no genius to see they’re knockin’ down the unions. But if you want to get something good, you got to pay a few dollars more. The union guy is out here in the elements. Hot sun! He’s got to work. People say, ‘He doesn’t work in cold weather.’ It’s because the mortar freezes!

“Also, you get your money’s worth. [A mason] can’t hide how much work he does. You can’t scam me. I can walk away and come back and see how much work you did.”...

Charlie Smith shakes his head.

“This town is a brick town. Local One! We were the first local! Now all you’re seein’ is precast and glass.” Charlie isn’t just lamenting the loss of work, either; his aesthetics are weighing in. Concrete looks terrible most of the time. It’s heavy and it’s ugly. Concrete in the rain, streaked and soiled, is ugly as hell. There’s no question about the distinctly impermanent look that modern materials lend big buildings, or of brick’s opposite effect.

As we talk, a fire truck passes on Russell. The driver bleats his horn. Smith waves. Union to union, workman to workman.

“Once in a lifetime you can build a stadium,” he says.

Above us a bricklayer gives a thumbs-up sign. It is not because things are going well; it is because he needs a brick, and in the bricklayer’s signing code, a thumb means a thumbnail bullnose. Ten fingers would mean he needs a comer slope for the quoin.

“Let’s go lay brick,” Charlie Smith says suddenly, with such enthusiasm and appetite, with so much emphasis that each word deserves to have its first letter capitalized. It’s a startling proposition, not the sort of statement you’d expect to hear from the mouths of other workmen: “Let’s go bag groceries,” or, “Let’s go write an editorial.” It is the declaration of a man who would rather lay brick than talk about it. And it is the one way to prove to the world that laying brick is more than you think it is.

Laying brick is all rhythm: Dip the flat trowel in the mortar to scoop it up, slap the stuff on top of the last brick with your right hand, drop a brick onto the new mortar with the left, take the comer of the trowel and trim the excess mortar off, dip the trowel back into the barrow, start it up again.

“I worked on the Russian embassy,” Smith says as he slaps a few bricks himself. “They had cameras on the wall. They were watching you all the time.”

To get on the wall he’d had to walk up to the concourse level, crawl over the ledge down onto the rickety planks of scaffolding, walk out to the corner of the tower, and climb down five feet on the scaffolding. The planks supported a barrow full of mortar and stacks of several thousand bullnose (fingernail) bricks, fired by Calvert, rose red the color.

Watch a good mortar man on the wall and the bricks start to pile up effortlessly, as if they’re all freeze frames adding up to an animated cartoon; before your eyes, the blank precast concrete support turns into the walls of a stadium whose brickwork could be in Venice.

“Brick changes color three times for you,” Charlie says. “When you lay it up, it’s wet. Then it dries. Then it gets washed down, it’s another color still.”

He notes my amusement at the perfection of his stroke.

“Like slicing lunch meat at a deli,” he says. But it’s not. Smith leaves no excess mortar. The line from brick to brick is perfect. It is like watching a good singles hitter, a Rod Carew, a man who makes a living from hits that don’t look so much as if a baseball being violently slapped around a field, but rather like the ball is being gently, though forcefully, redirected. A good mason makes the bricks look as if they’re eager to be on the wall.

It is not nearly as easy as it looks. The bullnose brick — a toenail — is heavy in your left hand; the uncooperative mortar drops and drips off the trowel. You slap it down, it’s much too thick, and when you slap the next brick down mortar comes shooting out of the grout like frosting between two slabs of steel.

Several minutes later five bricks on the wall of Camden Yards have been laid not by Local One but by a bystander, and they are the five shakiest bricks you’d ever want to see.

Charlie and I walk out of the park, to the spot where thousands of bricks are stacked.

“Here,” he says, hefting two bullnose toenails. “Take these. Use ‘em for bookends.”

I take one in each hand. They are much heavier than the fateful five. They are extremely heavy. They weigh as much, it seems, as the earth’s original ingredients. Real things could be built of these bricks.