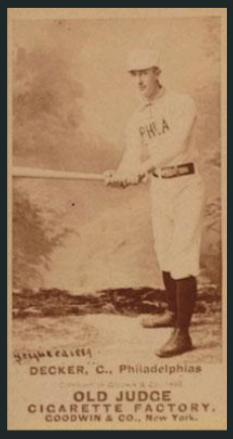
A TORONTO BASEBALL STORY

THE CATCHER WAS A CON MAN

The hard-to-believe life of Earle Harry Decker



1887–1888 · TORONTO INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION

Did Harry Decker really exist, or was he the work of an opium-addicted 19th century short story writer? Decker's personality was so dark, mysterious, manipulative, and deeply corrupt, his deeds so immoral, that he must have been a fictional character. He was truly one of the shadiest characters to ever step on the diamond for a Toronto team.

OPENING QUESTION

Could this man really have existed?

CATCHER

INVENTOR

FORGER

COUNTERFEITER



A professional ballplayer whose life reads like fiction.

EARLE HARRY DECKER · 1864–AFTER 1915

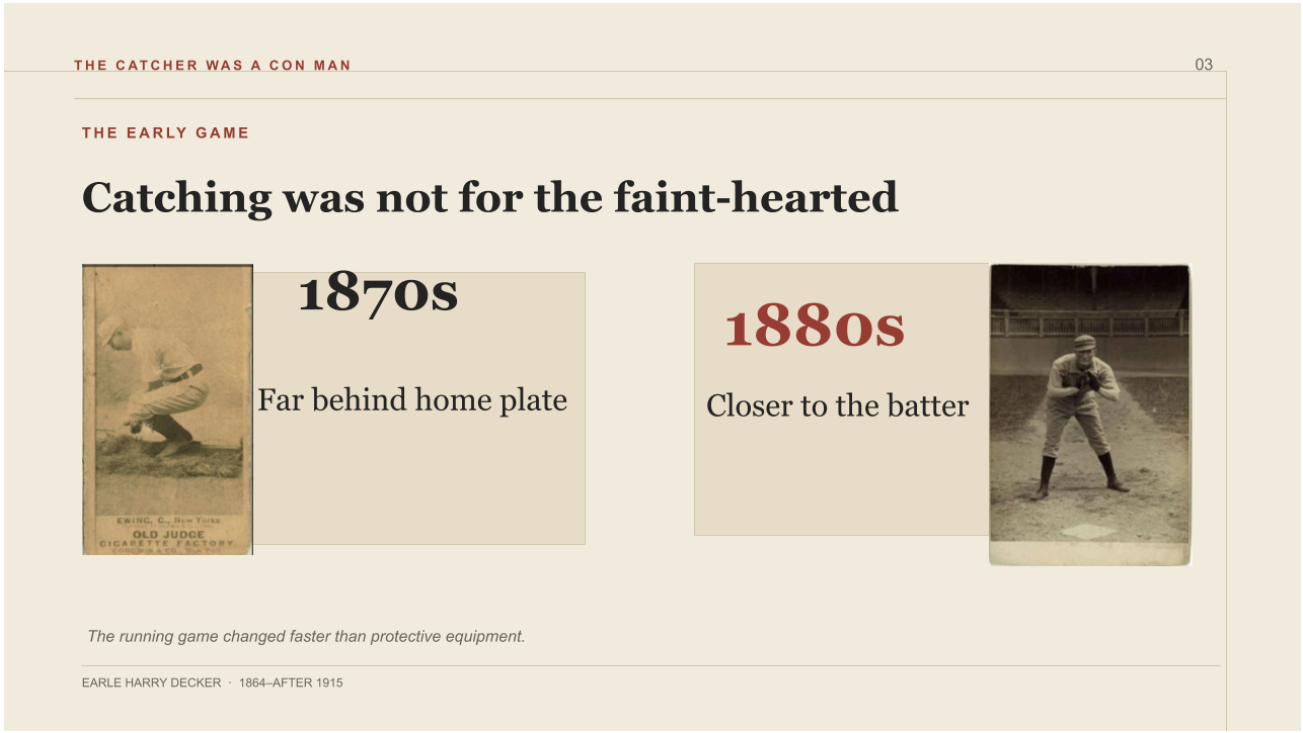
Decker was a 19th century ball player, as well as a con man, swindler, serial philanderer, forger, and counterfeiter, a career criminal who always seemed to be one step ahead of the law. Toronto newspaper sports sections of the day merely reported game results (most likely for the benefit of those who had a financial interest in the outcome), and didn't dive into analysis or background. From those that do exist, it appears when Decker played in Toronto for the 1887 and 1888 International Association seasons, he was a model citizen (he even invented and applied for a patent for a new catcher's mitt which would one day be named after him), but by the time he arrived in Ontario he already had something of a checkered past. And he would have a future that was literally chequered as well.

As far as we know, Decker was born Earle Harry Decker on September 3rd, 1864 in Lockport, Illinois. His family moved to Chicago a few years later; the city was booming as an industrial, agricultural and railway hub. Decker's father was a carpenter who opened a contracting business in the city a few years after Harry was born. The business prospered, and "Harry never wanted for anything while he was growing up."

Young Harry, like many other boys of his era, was drawn like a magnet to baseball, especially the position of catcher. Catchers of the 1870s, when he was growing up, were heroic - almost mythical - beings. The game was changing in its rules, strategies, and fundamentals almost yearly, and nowhere were these changes more profound than in the position behind the plate.

In the very early years of the game, catchers stood well back of home plate, so far back that the screened backstop, a fixture in baseball fields for a century and a half, was originally called "the Catcher's Fence," because that's where the majority of them stood, catching most pitches on the bounce. But as the running game evolved, catchers began to stand ever closer to home plate in order to try to thwart would-be base stealers. Equipment was primitive at best in those days (certainly, masks and shin guards were all but unheard of), and catchers moved up on the plate at the cost of their own health and safety.

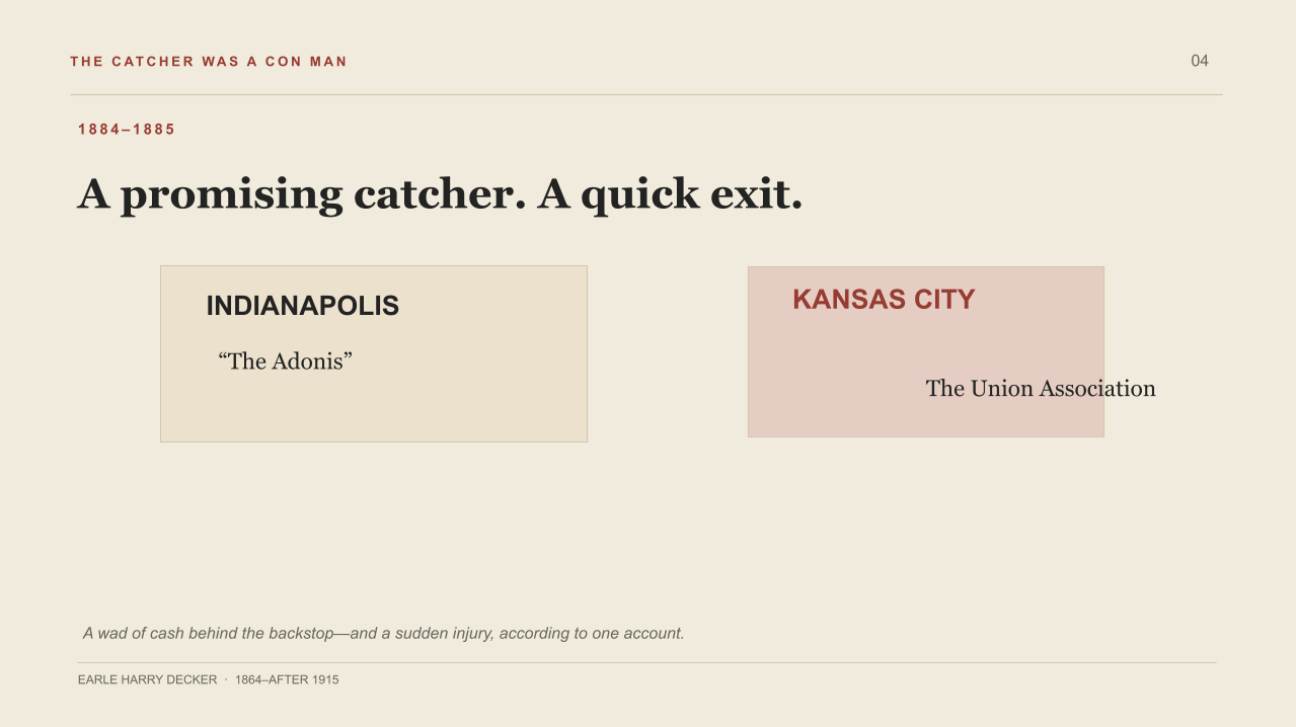
In the face of such bravery, catchers came to "...embody many of the traits of the archetypal American hero, including courage, resourcefulness, and a unique fitness to a specific task." It was no wonder that Decker, who by all accounts was a strapping, athletic, and resourceful young man, was attracted to the position. Having grown up in privilege, perhaps he was used to being the centre of attention; as a catcher, he could continue to be in the limelight.



But Decker's family may not have been in favour of his pursuit of what they saw as a game for children. Phillip Decker had a growing business, and it was likely assumed that his son would enter into it upon his graduation from high school. But young Harry had other ideas; he was considered a rising prospect (long before the term came into general use), and had even made the roster of the top amateur team in Chicago. One unverified account suggests he ran away and joined the army, likely to escape his parents' demands. But before he reported to training, he deserted. Later caught and facing court martial and likely imprisonment, Decker claimed insanity and was sent to an asylum. If this account is true, it would not be the last time he used this strategy to avoid incarceration.

In 1884, Decker signed his first pro contract with Evansville of the Northwest League. Part way through the season, he was sold to Indianapolis of the American Association, then a rival to the established National League. He acquired the nickname "The Adonis" at this time, as well as the attention of a newly formed outlaw loop, the Union Association. The UA did not respect player contracts of the two established leagues; many players jumped to the new league, lured by the promise of bigger paycheques. Decker was one of many.

It was said that while he was playing for Indianapolis one day, Ted Sullivan and “Peek-a-Boo” Veach from the Union’s Kansas City franchise sat behind the backstop to take in the game. Around the 2nd inning, Sullivan pulled out a wad of bills and yelled, “Oh, Deck! Look here!” In the sixth inning, Decker deliberately held a finger out while catching a pitch, injuring it in the process. He was removed from the game, and left immediately for Missouri. In what would become a familiar pattern, he left behind debts to his landlady, washerwoman, and several friends who had loaned him money.



The Union Association folded after just one season, and while many contract jumpers were forgiven, Decker was not. The loss of adulation and fame that came with his blacklisting must have left a terrible mark on Decker’s psyche.

For the 1885 season, he caught on with a semi-pro team in Keokuk, Iowa; this must have been a tremendous letdown for a player who was in the big leagues the season before. But it didn’t take long for Decker to catch the eyes of the Keokuk fans. One in particular, a comely 15-year-old girl named Annie Burns, certainly caught the hero backstop’s attention. Miss Burns was soon pregnant with Decker’s child; they married in mid-season, and the next spring she gave birth to a baby girl.

Decker's career appeared to be on the rebound in 1886. He was reinstated, and signed with Macon, Georgia of the Southern League. Despite the character flaws that had already emerged, he was a doting and dutiful father. Before a home game, the Macon club presented him with a gift of a baby carriage in a pre-game ceremony as a tribute to the devotion he apparently showed his daughter. On the field, Decker split time behind the plate and in the outfield, and hit well enough (.255 in 40 games) to get noticed by several big-league clubs, including the National League's Detroit Wolverines, who purchased his contract mid-season. Wolverines Manager Bill Watkins had been impressed with Decker's play when the club spent spring training in Georgia.

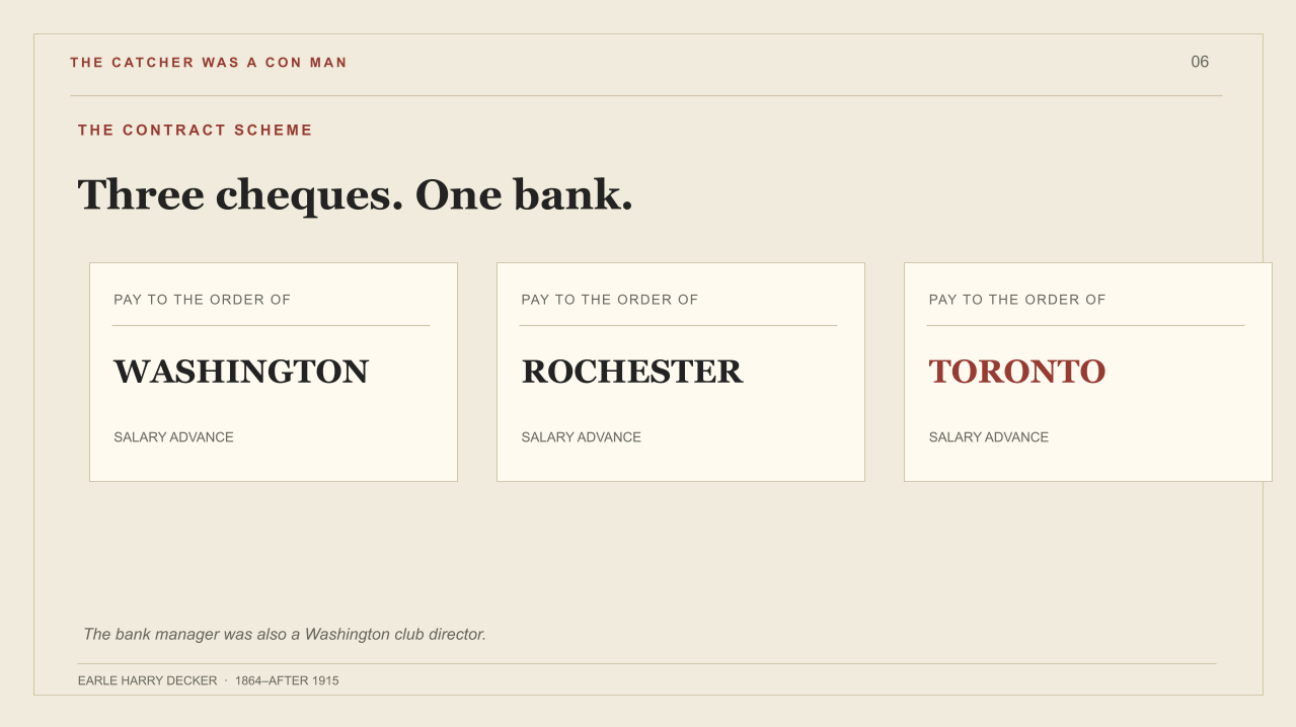
Detroit was enjoying a banner season, and by the end of July was leading the league with a 55-14 record. Decker was acquired as a backup to Charlie Bennett, who was regarded as one of the best backstops of his generation; he didn't play regularly, but Decker was back in the big leagues and on the way to a pennant. At 31, Bennett was on the downside of his career, and Decker seemed to be the heir apparent. But Decker may have been in over his head as a big leaguer who didn't have a lot of minor league experience. The Wolverines returned home on July 20th after a nine-game, three-city road trip having taken six of the games. A newspaper account claimed, "The Detroits gave an exhibition of first class ball, Decker's work behind the plate being the only weak spot. His play is ragged, being sometimes weak and again brilliant."



Detroit needed a reliable backup for the oft-injured Bennett; Decker didn't appear to fit the bill, and with the second-place Chicago White Stockings hard on the Wolverines' heels, Decker was dealt to Washington when a suitable replacement was found. In that instant, Decker had gone from the first place team to one languishing in the National League's cellar (Washington finished a dismal 28-92, 60 games out of first place). Decker hardly played for the Nationals, relegated to utility duty when the club signed a young catcher named Connie Mack as a backup. He certainly didn't endear himself to his manager, teammates, or Nationals' fans when he was implicated in a gambling scandal near the end of the season. Manager John Gaffney had received several telegrams warning him not to use the battery of Mack and pitcher Frank Gilmore. Gaffney determined that the telegrams were a ruse from gamblers who seemed to want him to use Decker; Gaffney went with his original lineup. Washington won on the strength of a Gilmore one-hit shutout. Decker was in the lineup at shortstop and contributed a pair of hits, but was thrown out at home with the game scoreless, and made a pair of errors in the field. In fairness to Decker, it was his only appearance at the position for Washington, but his reputation suffered a hit in addition to his indifferent play.

To add insult to injury, not only did Detroit go on to clinch the National League pennant while Decker was playing out the string in Washington, the Wolverines also went on to defeat American Association champs St. Louis in a 15-game exhibition series called the "World's Championship Series" that caught the nation's attention. Decker, who craved the spotlight, had to be envious at missing out on being on the biggest stage in the game.

Washington planned to release Decker at the end of the season, but he begged management for another chance, claiming his wife's illness prevented him from playing his best. And the Nationals may well have given him another chance, if not for a ruse Decker concocted. With his availability for the 1887 season up in the air, Decker accepted offers (and advances on his salary, a common practice at the time) from Rochester and Toronto of the International Association, as well as one from the Nationals, who felt there was a place for him after all. And Decker might well have gotten away with this scheme had he not tried to cash all three cheques at once at a Washington bank. It turns out the bank manager was a director of the ballclub. Undaunted, Decker expanded his scheme by representing himself as Cal Broughton, a minor league catcher, and Dave Oldfield, his Washington teammate. His plan failed when a man was sent to the address Decker listed for both men, only to find a



vacant lot and Decker pacing back and forth on the sidewalk, waiting for the mail man. In the course of an investigation, it was revealed that Decker had received a cheque from the Denver club by passing himself off as yet another catcher, this one named Jack Hayes.

Washington sold Decker's rights to Toronto as a result of his shenanigans, and it appeared that his reputation and career were in peril. But Toronto took a chance on the young catcher, hoping a change of scenery might turn him around. And for two seasons, Decker played an important role for a team that won an International Association title in his first season, and finished second in his final year in the city. Decker played a utility role for the Torontos, filling in at third Base and in the outfield, and spelling off first string catcher - and former Washington teammate - Oldfield. There is no word on whether or not Oldfield was aware his fellow Canuck had used his identity just months before.

One would think that Decker might settle into his role with Toronto, and get on a straighter path in life, but his life was about to reach yet another turning point. Maybe he was unhappy with being a minor leaguer - and not even a regular at that - after having tasted life in the big leagues. Being traded to lowly Washington, where he rode the bench, must have been a huge blow to his apparently oversized ego, and he still smarted from that. Or perhaps he

THE CATCHER WAS A CON MAN 07

1887–1888

Two seasons in Toronto

1887

LEAGUE CHAMPIONS

1888

SECOND PLACE



Decker, Philadelphia-era Old Judge card

The regular catcher was Dave Oldfield—whose name Decker had impersonated.

EARLE HARRY DECKER · 1864–AFTER 1915

was unhappy with his role, unable to supplant Oldfield as Toronto's regular catcher.

Decker did apply for a patent on a revolutionary glove designed specifically for catcher while he played in Canada. According to a former teammate named

THE CATCHER WAS A CON MAN 08

THE INVENTION

A steak inside a catcher's glove

STEAK

LEATHER · RAGS · FELT

1889

U.S. PATENT 408,650

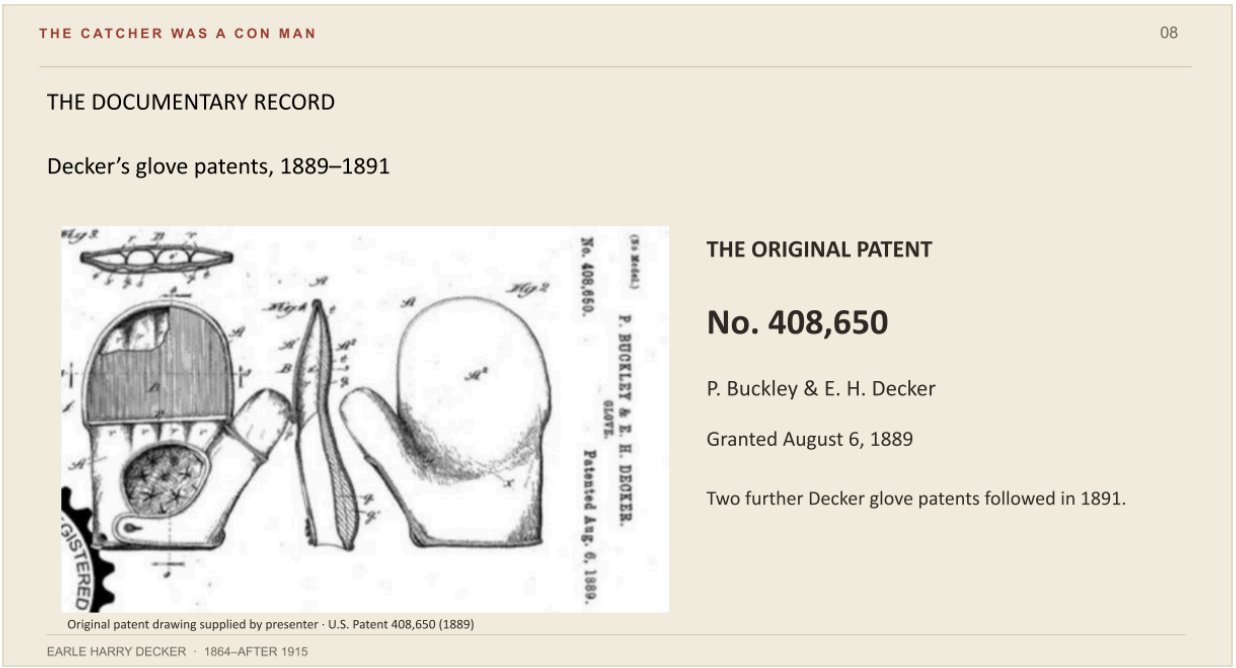
Patent records establish his involvement; accounts differ on who invented the mitt first.

EARLE HARRY DECKER · 1864–AFTER 1915

Dan Dugdale, Decker had been experimenting with a glove for several years. He started with a fingerless glove, but that was not enough to cushion the throws from pitchers who threw hard. One day, he put a steak inside the glove, which, aside from the mess it likely caused, saved his fingers. Eventually, he replaced the beef with leather. “This gave him the idea,” said Dugdale,

“of building the mitt up bigger, and lacing fingers on the back of the glove. One day he hit upon the idea of stuffing the glove with rags in the mitt for protection, and finally got some good felt and used that.”

One would think Decker knew a good thing when he saw it. Perhaps he was unable to envision how revolutionary his glove would become, but having spent several seasons in professional baseball, when teams went through multiple catchers a season as a result of finger injuries suffered on unprotected hands, one would think he would pursue this opportunity and seek to develop it. Decker did acquire a partner, but he failed to pay the $50 fee associated with his application for a patent, and basically walked away from his invention. Former player turned baseball equipment manufacturer



Albert G. Spalding quickly moved in and bought Decker’s invention and patented it; he reportedly paid Decker a fraction of what the mitt brought his company in sales. Decker always seemed to live in the here and now.

Perhaps he lost interest in the minutiae of developing a new product and bringing it to market. While he proved to be meticulous later in life, clearly he had no patience or interest in seeing this glove - which Spalding named the “Decker Patented Glove” - come to fruition. So began a phase of Decker’s life when he went from one get-rich-quick scheme to the next. Each con was bigger than the last, along with his bravado.

Things went downhill for Decker in a hurry after his time in Toronto. He played for the Philadelphia Phillies for two seasons, but suffered another blow when his young daughter died. Traded to Pittsburgh, he was hit in the head by a pitch, but by then the damage may have already been done. Playing without a mask in the early years of his career, this was likely not the first blow he had received, and it leaves one to wonder if concussions he suffered in his twenties contributed to his erratic and criminal behaviour later in life. Trouble seemed to follow Decker around. His final pro stop was in New Haven of the Eastern Association in 1891, where his reputation as a womanizer preceded him. “Someone suggests that the New Haven girls will give E. Harry Decker a rousing reception,” wrote a local sportswriter:

> “Probably. But that is not the vital question. What will E. Harry give the New Haven girls? Harry is very generous, you know, and when he meets a few girls who believe in reciprocity without protection there is likely to be an increase of commerce…..”

Decker was arrested before the season even started, charged with, among other things, the seduction of an underage girl, forging the names of the Philadelphia owners on cheques, and stealing from former teammates. Decker avoided jail time when his victims agreed to financial restitution, which was likely paid by his parents. They even tried to get him to settle down by setting him up in business in Chicago, but that didn’t last.

In his defence, Decker often wrote to sports editors of the day. To one reporter, he said, “I think I am a most unfortunate man. It seems that if I merely look at a girl, she fancies so much that a breach of promise is the result.” His wife sued him for divorce because of his wandering unfaithful ways, but Decker, it seems, talked her out of that. It seemed that while he was so brazen and careless in his cons that he almost wanted to be caught, he also acted as if there was no situation - no matter how precarious - that he could not charm his way out of.

Out of pro ball after New Haven released him mid-season, Decker drifted from east to west, just staying long enough to accumulate a load of debts and forged cheques before leaving town. At one point, he was charged, convicted, and on his way to prison when he claimed insanity, convinced a medical doctor of his condition, and was sent to an insane asylum instead. Weeks later, he was a free man, having convinced staff at the institution that he was “cured.”

Eventually, his wife divorced him, and his parents stopped bailing him out. After being charged once more with numerous counts of forgery, stealing a horse, and renting a $75 bicycle and not returning it, in 1897 Decker was sentenced to eight years in Joliet (IL) prison, a harsh sentence likely based on his lengthy criminal history. He went straight for several years, but Decker soon returned to his old ways, in a much more sophisticated manner. Having worked his way west, Decker was hired as a brass finisher for the Southern Pacific Railway in Sacramento. While there, he made the acquaintance of a young woman named Maude McNeil. The pair soon became engaged, and moved to Los Angeles, where Decker used the alias Earl H. Davenport. The



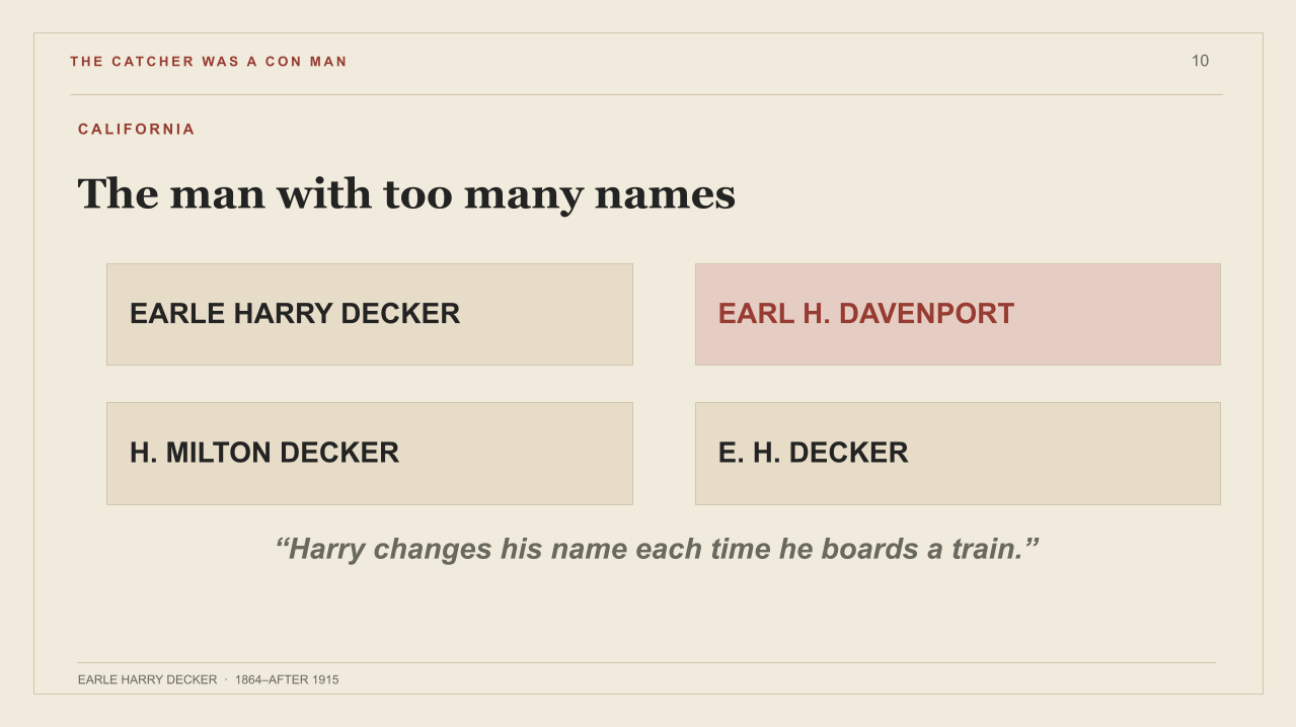
couple showed up daily at a hotel in the city armed with a sack full of coins, which they proceeded to use on the slot machines in the hotel’s casino. Decker would even give coins away to fellow slot players. The hotel detective

was soon brought in to investigate; it was discovered that Decker/Davenport's fakes were clever, but not quite good enough. Detectives followed Decker to his rooming house, where they found counterfeiting equipment like molds and dies - that he learned how to make while working for the railway - in a locked storage trunk in his room. It was determined through further investigation that Decker had planned a massive counterfeiting scheme throughout the city, and that the hotel was a test run for his plan. Decker was arrested, and while in jail awaiting trial, had a steady stream of young female visitors. The future Mrs. Davenport, Miss McNeil, disappeared when she was told that her fiancé had a wife back east (this may have been a second wife). Confounding his case was the fact that Davenport/Decker refused to give his real identity. During his trial, Decker suddenly acquired symptoms of tuberculosis, was given a reduced sentence, and was sent to a prison in the drier environs of an Arizona prison. Just like with his supposed bouts of insanity, Decker made a quick and miraculous recovery.

A free man once more, Decker returned to California, taking a job as a carpenter in Pasadena, and rented a room from a widow. Decker worked his charms on her; the widow, a lady named Lawton, claimed that he was "in every way a gentleman of culture and refinement…he was reticent to a marked degree, and told us little of his past life." Like many other people in Decker's life, she missed the obvious red flags. Before long, Decker was courting Widow Lawton's daughter Frances, an unmarried 42-year-old school teacher. Frances fell under Decker's charms, and the pair were married just months later with her mother's blessing. In just a few short months, he had blown through his new bride's life savings, forged more cheques, borrowed money from friends, and taken to the wind. With his usual brazen, daring to be caught style, Decker used the names of one of the marshals who had arrested him for his counterfeiting plot on a cheque he wrote to cover his estranged wife's rent; Frances was eager to help the detectives who showed up at her door soon after. Decker moved to Los Angeles under yet another assumed name, but detectives tracked him down, and quickly arrested him. Frustrated at trying to learn Decker's identity, the investigators took to the local newspapers with his story, trying to track down the details of his past. Not surprisingly, a slew of reports of Decker's cons came forward, one from as far away as Florida. During his trial on a number of charges, Mrs. Lawton surprisingly came forward on his behalf, suggesting that his actions were those of someone who was "mentally unbalanced." Desperate to avoid life behind bars once more, Decker claimed that he was kicked in the head by a

horse when he was younger. Given Decker's history, the judge in the case was not swayed, and sentenced him to three years in San Quentin.

Decker took many people into his confidence, and betrayed almost every single one of them, including teammates, his wife (or wives), landlords, and his parents. His schemes seemed to only get more outlandish and more reckless each time he was caught. But for every person he seemed to let down, there were many who felt Decker knew exactly what he was doing. One of the detectives who had arrested Decker claimed that, "....he has the bad streak in him that makes him prey upon society. He is a fairly skillful forger, but his forte lies in his ability to beguile trusting women and shop-keepers." A person described as an acquaintance of Decker's didn't buy

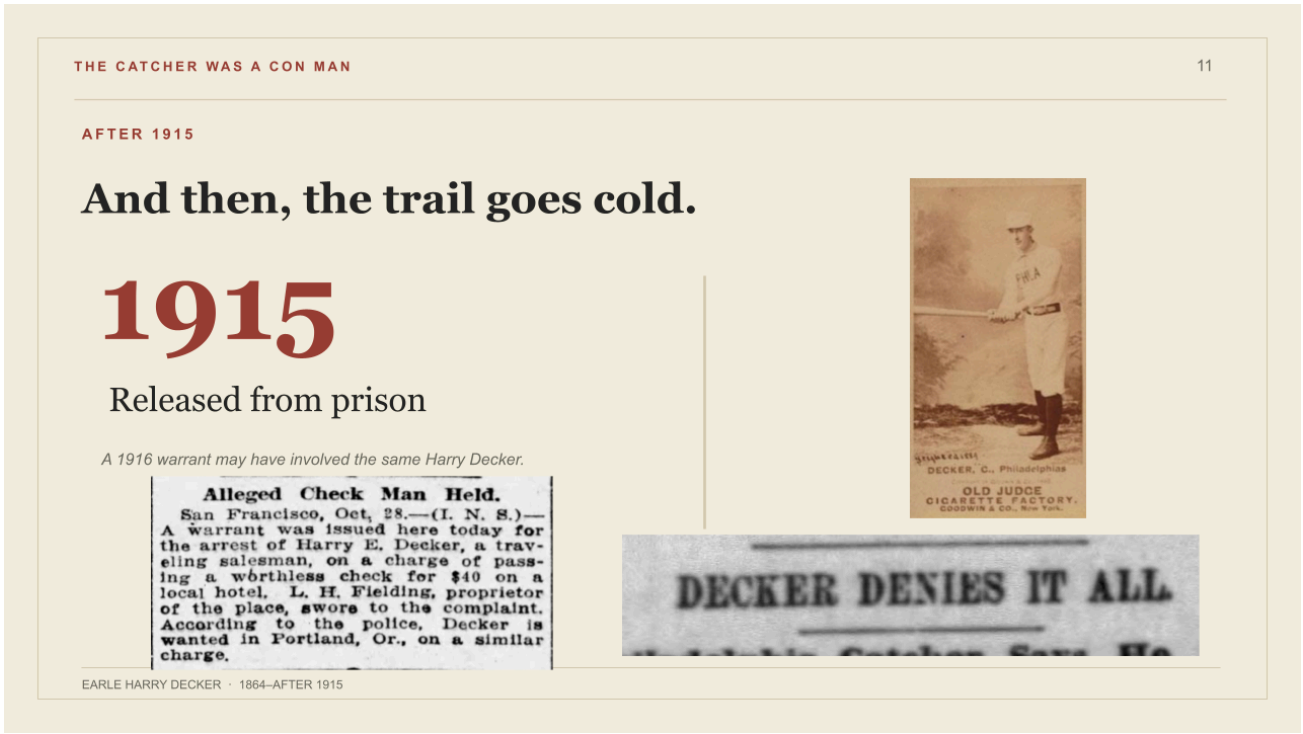


his act. "Harry is again in trouble," he said. "That is, Harry is always in trouble. Harry has hitherto had his troubles confined to escapades with the gentler sex." A teammate put it more simply: "Harry changes his name each time he boards a train."

Little is known of Decker's time in Toronto, but for a brief period, it must have been a relatively peaceful and happy time in his life. Newspaper reports were quite complimentary of his play. His wife and young daughter were likely with him, and he would have enjoyed being a minor celebrity during the team's

championship run in his first season with the club. But it wasn't enough - it was never enough. Decker longed for the spotlight of the big leagues. He enjoyed life as a big leaguer; he probably spent like one, too, hence his need to find quick and easy methods of financing his lifestyle. Decker liked fancy clothes - in one city, he was accused of stealing a suit from a teammate; in another, he left behind a huge bill at a local tailor's shop. Perhaps growing up in a relatively wealthy home didn't install the greatest of work ethics in Decker. His parents bailing him out frequently probably didn't help, either. Despite his success in Toronto, Decker no doubt saw his big league prospects fading away. While he had been a hot prospect as a teenager, he was a marginal major leaguer at best. He probably could have enjoyed a fine career in Toronto - the team was under sound management, and the club was quickly becoming the most popular team in the city. But it was not to be for the restless Decker, who clearly was not content with being a big fish in a small pond.

Earle Harry Decker, or H. Milton Decker, E.H. Decker, N. Decker, or Earl H. Davenport was released from prison in 1915, and he appears to have disappeared after that. Did he finally go straight, or did he learn from his previous mistakes, and start to cover his tracks? Perhaps he went on to even bigger and more elaborate cons, like the counterfeiting scheme. Whatever



happened to Decker upon his release from prison, his trail appears to have gone cold. A news dispatch from California said that an arrest warrant had been issued for one Harry Decker in October, 1916. There is no way of knowing if this was the catcher turned conman, but this Harry Decker was wanted on a charge of forging a check at a hotel in the city, very much fitting his modus operandi. Decker was said to be a travelling salesman - a perfect cover, as Decker had briefly sold sewing machines back east - and was wanted on a similar charge in Portland. Otherwise, there is no trace of Decker or any of his known aliases.

DM Fox
November 2026