

THE REAL GATSBY:

GEORGE GORDON MOORE



A Granddaughter's Memoir

Mickey Rathbun

THE REAL GATSBY:
GEORGE GORDON MOORE

A Granddaughter's Memoir

Mickey Rathbun

White River Press
Amherst, Massachusetts

Contents

Prologue: A Photograph and a Jar of Sand	i
Chapter 1: Dauntless Centaurs	1
Chapter 2: The Real Gatsby?	7
Chapter 3: Wyoming	14
Chapter 4: Gaining Traction	19
Chapter 5: The Racing Life	26
Chapter 6: “I Discovered England”	32
Chapter 7: Hunting Pigs in Paradise	37
Chapter 8: Cowboy and Cotton	44
Chapter 9: London Calling	56
Chapter 10: Looks, Bloodlines, and Money.	65
Chapter 11: “War is Certain. Come at Once.”	74
Chapter 12: A Mother’s Meddling	86
Chapter 13: Dances of Death.	98
Chapter 14: A Fog of Ignorance and Doubt	102
Chapter 15: A German Spy at GHQ?.	115

Chapter 16: “I Always Fear What Too Many Know” . . .	125
Chapter 17: Reckonings	131
Chapter 18: The Governor’s Daughter	138
Chapter 19: The Golden State	144
Chapter 20: Stanway on the Pacific	150
Chapter 21: A 23,000-Acre Playground	160
Chapter 22: Empty Promises	166
Chapter 23: Childhood at Rancho San Carlos	169
Chapter 24: The Foss Twins Behave Badly	178
Chapter 25: Decline and Fall	186
Chapter 26: “My Easter Holidays”	195
Chapter 27: Orphans	202
Chapter 28: Out Stealing Horses	210
Chapter 29: Ending Up.	218
Chapter 30: Rancho San Carlos Revisited	226
Epilogue: How the Ranch Was Lost	233
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	243
<i>Notes on Sources</i>	245
<i>Illustration Credits</i>	259
<i>About the Author</i>	263

Dauntless Centaurs

MY GRANDFATHER showed up on Long Island the summer of 1919 with a polo mallet in one hand and a business card in the other. The card read “George Gordon Moore, Capitalist.” He was a striking figure, with jet-black hair, intense brown eyes, a dark complexion, and a stocky physique developed by years of training in the boxing gym and, more recently, on the polo field. Moore’s trip was more than an opportunity for sporting pleasure. London had been his financial playground before the war, but the war had bled England dry, and New York had usurped London’s role as the world’s banker. Moore, forty-three at the time, knew there was wealth to be mined on Long Island’s North Shore. With its country estates, bucolic meadows, and pristine oceanfront, the North Shore had become a paradise for socialites, celebrities, and well-heeled entrepreneurs in search of glamour and the good life. Long Island was one of those places, as Fitzgerald wrote in *The Great Gatsby*, where “people played polo and were rich together.” There was nowhere Moore would rather have been; it was a new piggybank waiting to be cracked.

Moore had had his first taste of polo in 1912 when he was invited to play at the San Mateo Polo Club, just south of San Francisco. It didn’t take him longer than a New York minute to realize that polo had all the trappings of wealth and class he coveted. As a 1917 article in *Sunset* magazine put it, “Polo

is King in American society and where polo goes Milady and her fleet of trunks go also. In fact, it is considered now part of a debutante's social equipment that she can tell a No. 1 in polo from a Back and will recognize an off-side play." Polo was not just a game, it was a lifestyle.

Emboldened by his time in England during the war, Moore felt he had acquired a sufficient aura of aristocracy to style himself as a polo player. After the Armistice, he headed to California to take up the sport. Years earlier, he had done business with William S. Tevis Jr., scion of a venerable California family and a member of the Santa Barbara Polo Club. Moore reacquainted himself with Tevis, and with Tevis's support and encouragement, he joined the club and threw himself into the sport with fierce determination. A seasoned sports commentator called polo players "dauntless centaurs." The game is fiendishly difficult, involving the coordination of many bodies—human and equine—moving quickly and independently as they try to drive a small, hard white ball into the opponents' goal. Although dangerous and unsportsmanlike conduct is prohibited, polo entails much brute physical contact. As Will Rogers famously remarked, "They call polo a gentleman's game for the same reason that they call a tall man 'Shorty.'"

Short on polo experience but long on money, Moore bankrolled the four-man Santa Barbara squad. In return for his financial backing, Moore was named team captain. Within a few months of his arrival in Santa Barbara, he was in command of one of the West Coast's most successful polo teams. In June 1919, the team and their ponies traveled by train across the country. Their destination was Long Island, New York; their ambition was to dominate the East Coast's summer polo season.

Although polo was relatively new in the West, the Santa Barbara foursome stood strong against the more seasoned eastern teams. At the 1919 Monmouth Cup championship match in Rumson, New Jersey, a highpoint of the East Coast

season, Santa Barbara took on the Meadowbrook Polo Club of Westbury, Long Island, the oldest and most prestigious club in the country. Meadowbrook's team that day included C. V. "Sonny" Whitney, an heir to the Whitney and Vanderbilt fortunes, and John Rodman "Roddy" Wanamaker, an heir to the Philadelphia department store empire. But its top player was Tommy Hitchcock, a celebrated young war hero who had just completed his first semester at Harvard. Even in 1919, it was clear that Hitchcock was bound for greatness. He was an extraordinary athlete, combining bravery, cunning, and ruthlessness with grace and humility that gained the respect of every player he faced. Fans and sportswriters idolized him on and off the field. His name was to polo what Babe Ruth's was to baseball.

Both Hitchcock's parents were seasoned equestrians, and young Tommy was swinging a polo mallet from the back of a horse by age six. At twelve, he was sent to St. Paul's School in New Hampshire. From the outbreak of World War I in August 1914, Hitchcock and his family paid close attention to the combat in Europe. Born in France, his mother had close ties there that made the horrors of war especially troubling. When the United States joined the Allies in the spring of 1917, Hitchcock signed on with the celebrated Lafayette Flying Corps, a branch of the French Foreign Legion composed mainly of American aviators. At the time, Hitchcock was seventeen years old and two months shy of his graduation from St. Paul's.

Hitchcock's experience in the war was harrowing and heroic. He flew several successful combat missions before being shot down in German territory, where he was held prisoner for six months. While being moved from one prison camp to another, he jumped off the train and escaped. He made his way on foot, traveling only at night, more than a hundred miles to the safety of the Swiss border. Hitchcock's physical courage and mental toughness captivated America's imagination. Endowed with well-proportioned, aristocratic

features and a sturdy, powerful frame, he looked the part of the warrior-athlete. The country, reeling from the trauma of the war, eagerly embraced him. Hitchcock was only nineteen when he played for the Monmouth Cup, but he was already a “newspaper hero,” as F. Scott Fitzgerald, a fervent admirer of Hitchcock, put it.

Hitchcock’s biographer, Nelson W. Aldrich Jr., compared the 1919 Santa Barbara team to “a band of outlaws let loose in the manicured gardens of the East.” They played a rough-and-tumble game that took their gentlemanly competitors by surprise. The West Coast players “were not gentlemen, almost by definition,” wrote Aldrich. The Californians knew that Hitchcock was Meadowbrook’s secret weapon and they were determined to box him in, whatever it took. From the moment the Monmouth Cup players rode onto the field—the Meadowbrook team in its trademark robin’s egg blue and the Santa Barbara players in their all-white jerseys—it was clear that the game would be an epic confrontation between the blue-blooded civility of the East and the red-blooded barbarism of the West.

The competition was ferocious, and Moore was the most ferocious of all. He repeatedly blocked Hitchcock by digging his shoulder into Hitchcock’s ribs. At one point, when Hitchcock tried to gallop past him, Moore shouted, “You son of a bitch!” and struck him—perhaps accidentally—on the side of the head with his mallet. A few strides later, Hitchcock realized that the blow had lacerated his ear and that blood was streaming down his shoulder. He left the game long enough to be bandaged up and came back on the field, as Aldrich put it, “not angry with Moore but resolved to give him the roughest three chukkers of polo the older man would ever see.”

Santa Barbara defeated Meadowbrook that day. Hitchcock never liked to lose but he was impressed by Moore’s ruthless tenacity. Moore likewise admired Hitchcock’s unflinching mastery of the sport and his effortless upper-class gentility.

Despite their twenty-five-year age difference, the two competitors became close friends. They continued to play together at Meadowbrook for the rest of the summer. Moore applied himself to the game with doggedness and discipline. Hitchcock appreciated his eagerness to learn and helped him improve his accuracy and teamwork so that he need not rely on physical strength alone. Years later, looking back on that summer, Moore said, “The most important thing I did that year was to play polo with the best team on Long Island.”

Like so many other young men who had survived the war, Tommy Hitchcock had returned home feeling aimless, confused. The thrill and danger of battle had exhilarated him; he sought to replicate the authenticity of that experience on the polo field. While some found Moore’s brutality on the field offensive, Hitchcock enjoyed it. His bloody clashes with Moore were nothing if not authentic. He had the scars to prove it. He admired the older man’s *otherness*, his raw energy and combativeness. For Hitchcock, Moore, a self-made man who followed his passions with force and grit, was the living embodiment of the American Dream.

Moore’s latest gambit involved mining metals, a pursuit that sparked Hitchcock’s sense of adventure. In the 1920s, “mining lay closer to the heart of the American dream than most enterprises,” observed Aldrich. “When Moore was young, mining was still a *frontier* gamble, an outdoorsman’s risk: the flash of gold in the pan, the dull gleam of ore in dark tunnels, the gusher in the desert.” Imagining a future for himself in Moore’s rugged realm of business, Hitchcock studied chemistry at Harvard. Casting about for a job, he was grateful when Moore offered to take him on as his associate. After graduating from Harvard in 1922, Hitchcock began working at Moore’s office in midtown Manhattan, learning the intricacies of the minerals trade, speculation, and finance.

The relationship between Hitchcock and Moore epitomized the collision of Old and New Money that was to define the Roaring Twenties. Several years ago, I visited Nelson

Aldrich at his home in Connecticut. He is best known for his book *Old Money: The Mythology of Wealth in America*, an insightful analysis of the relationship between money, social status, and success. Aldrich remembered my grandfather and the outsized role he had played in Hitchcock's early life. In his view, Moore "was a perfect type of the reckless adventurer who had always fascinated Tommy." He suggested that while Moore did not enjoy the privilege of Old Money, he enjoyed the freedom from its rigid rules of conduct. Aldrich saw him as a "buccaneer," ready to overstep the bounds of prudence and decorum when it suited him. As a once-poor immigrant, he had an "edge," said Aldrich. "He did not know what he could not do."

You may purchase the entire book at your local bookstore, or online at Bookshop.org, [Amazon](http://Amazon.com), and [Barnes & Noble](http://BarnesandNoble.com).