

LIFE AFTER FAVRE

A Season of Change with the
Green Bay Packers and Their Fans

Phil Hanrahan



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Lyric excerpted from “Lucy Doesn’t Love You” by Ivy. Written by Adam Schlesinger, Andy Chase, and Dominique Durand (Unfiltered Music/Universal Music Publishing). Lyrics reprinted by permission.

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This book is dedicated to my parents.

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“There is no script for this.”

—Packers head coach Mike McCarthy, July 26, 2008

“Some dreams don’t come true.”

—lyric by Adam Schlesinger, for the band Ivy

PROLOGUE: “ROOKIE” HAS A MELTDOWN

“**R**OOKIE” COULDN’T TAKE it anymore. He’d had enough. Four straight months of callers bashing Packers management for not welcoming Brett Favre back. Week after week it was *Brett this*, *Brett that*, two hours of listener calls a day. This Green Bay sports radio station was on the front lines when it came to fan feedback. What had the Favre Horns—that’s what Rookie called ’em—all riled up this Friday morning was the previous night’s thrilling 34–31 Jets victory over archrival New England. Favre had gone 26 of 33 for 258 yards, with two touchdowns and no picks. In overtime, he took his team 64 yards in 14 plays, connecting on 5 of 6 passes. He looked like the Brett of old. Or make that the Brett of 2007, as callers were oh-so-quick to remind Rookie. The Brett who led the Packers to 14 victories and a near Super Bowl berth. That Brett.

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“This one ranks right up near the top,” Favre told reporters after the game, a quote that put a little ding in the hearts of Packers fans. After Jets kicker Jay Feely booted home the winning 34-yarder, Brett raised his arms in grinning triumph, just like he’d done so many times for the Pack. Through ten games, Favre was leading the AFC in completion percentage. The New York Jets had won four straight. At 7–3, they were alone atop the AFC East for the first time since 2001.

Rookie had been at WDUZ longer than anyone—hence the nickname. They didn’t call him Iron Man—they saved that for Favre—but the fact remained that Rookie was sturdy, durable, a radio grinder doing twenty-five hours of sports talk weekly with his partner, Bill Rabeor. Weekdays from 6–9 A.M. they hosted “The Fan Nation Morning Show,” a drive-time program broadcast on 107.5 FM and 1400 AM The Fan, a.k.a. *Northeast Wisconsin’s Sports Authority* and *Your Source for ESPN Radio*. At 9 A.M. they kicked off their two-hour call-in show, “Fan Line with Bill and Rookie.” Guess what people wanted to talk about today?

Normally the last twenty minutes on Friday morning formed the best part of Rookie’s radio week—and not only because his weekend more or less started at the top of the hour. It was the “Friday Fish Fry” segment of the show, one in which listeners called or e-mailed to salute or slam some person in the sporting world. If you were a caller offering kudos, you asked Rookie and Bill to “pop a top” to the person. They cued the carbonated opening to Jim Ed Brown’s 1967 country hit “Pop a Top,” a tune that starts with possibly the world’s greatest recording of a pull-tab can being opened.

If, conversely, you were calling to rip someone, you told Rookie and Bill to “dunk ’em in the hot fryer!” With the push of a button, they’d promptly cue a sound effect of lake perch dropping into a vat of sizzling oil.

PROLOGUE: "ROOKIE" HAS A MELTDOWN

Guess who was getting kudos today?

Guess who people wanted to fry?

"Pop a top to Brett!" hollered Scott from Sturgeon Bay. "Brett's on the train to the playoffs!"

That was a twofer. Well done, Scott from Sturgeon Bay. A plug for Brett and a not-so-subtle dig at Packers head coach Mike McCarthy, who the previous summer had famously said, "The train has left the station," meaning the team was moving on without Favre. "Watching the Iron Man last night was awesome!" exclaimed Eric from Appleton. "He still has tons of fans out here. We want him to go to the Super Bowl and win it for the Jets!" And now Brian from Neenah was on the line. "Crack open a tall cold one for number 4!" he trumpeted. "Brett knows how to win the close ones! To think we could have had him for another year!"

Rookie and Bill popped a top. Multiple tops. *Whoosh!*

Mike from Green Bay called with payback on his mind. "Get that deep fryer going!" he shouted. "You saw what Brett did last night. I wanna deep-fry all those Favre bashers! Cook 'em up!"

Sizzle, sizzle, fry.

Todd from Oshkosh had it in for the Packers general manager. "Let's deep-fry Ted Thompson!" he crowed.

At this point Rookie finally lost it. After sixteen weeks, ten hours a week—160 hours of his life—hearing the same thing over and over, he had his Howard Beale from *Network* moment. He wasn't so much mad as hell, he just didn't want to take it anymore.

"It's driving me crazy, listening to this every day!" he said into his mike. "When's it gonna end?"

"Not till January," said Bill.

"For two days before the Pats game, everyone was bashing Brett," Rookie continued. "Now because of last night all the Favre Horns call

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in and blow! ‘Brett this, Brett that, if only we still had Brett.’ Well, we don’t! The Jets spent \$140 million in the offseason—no wonder their record’s better than last year! Let’s see how the Packers and Jets do over the next three years. It’s been like this since August! People who just can’t get over it. When are they gonna move on? It’s so tiresome, speculating what it would be like if Favre was here! He’s not! Can’t we talk about the guys who *are* here!”

Rookie paused for breath. Scanning some e-mails, he groaned.

“Oh my God, it’s all just more of the same! It’s never gonna stop. Five hours a day, it’s all we talk about. Brett’s been gone three months! He’s not coming back! People gotta start dealing with reality. When are we gonna put this to bed? *Do we ever get to talk about anything else?*”

The show went to commercial. “Drop by Brett Favre’s Steakhouse on Brett Favre Pass for lunch or dinner,” said the chipper radio voice in Rookie’s headphones. It was the first ad of the break. There was no escaping No. 4. Rookie held his head in his hands.

INTRODUCTION: “WE’RE AT THE GAME”

I T HAD HAPPENED before. Twice. Lambeau and Lombardi—two men synonymous with the Green Bay Packers, winners of eleven NFL championships between them, faces of the franchise—suddenly gone. Curly Lambeau, a hometown football star back from Notre Dame, had the idea to start a semi-professional team. It was 1919. He founded the Packers, coached them, managed operations, and played, taking snaps at halfback and throwing passes when he didn’t run. He played through the 1929 season and coached and managed the team for another twenty years after that. Thirty years as Packer Incarnate. Then just like that, he was gone. After toxic feuds with the team’s board of directors he departed for, of all places, Chicago, becoming head coach and vice president of the Chicago Cardinals. “I don’t see how the Packers can last without him,” said one of Lambeau’s former offensive linemen, Charles “Buckets” Goldenberg. “He *was* the Packers.”

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Lambeau spent two years in Chicago then headed east to coach the Redskins. Washington is also where Vince Lombardi, the savior of the franchise, went too, in 1969. After a bloodless year serving as Packers GM, Lombardi wanted to coach again. And he liked that the Skins gave him a small team ownership stake.

Lambeau resigned. Lombardi asked the Packers to release him from a five-year contract. Both times it was the frigid start of February. And both times, Packer fans mourned the departure of a man who had turned their tiny Midwestern city into a place of champions, of glory.

This book began when Brett Favre announced his retirement on March 6, 2008. After sixteen seasons as a Packer, three league MVP awards, a Super Bowl victory in '97, a Super Bowl loss in '98, a near-trip to the big game ten years later, NFL records for career touchdown passes, passing yards, completions, and attempts, and a mind-bending, record-breaking streak of 275 consecutive starts by a quarterback commencing in a time when George Bush's *father* was in the White House, it was over. A lifelong Packer fan raised in Wisconsin, I watched Favre's tearful press conference from my apartment in Los Angeles. The world as Packer fans knew it had changed. A new era—a whole new *reality*—had arrived. It seemed like this might be a book. The story of the first season A.B. *After Brett*.

I left California for Wisconsin in early July.

Eight days later we learned Favre wanted back. Things just got more interesting. They didn't get any less interesting when the Packers traded their iconic quarterback to the New York Jets for a conditional fourth-round draft pick. Like Lambeau, like Lombardi, Brett Lorenzo Favre would come striding out of some other team's tunnel onto some other team's field for the September home-opener of some other NFL team. A big-city team. A team from New York.

INTRODUCTION: "WE'RE AT THE GAME"

Wow.

All season long—you just knew it—Packer fans would have one eye on Green Bay, the other on Brett and the Jets. Quarterback performances would be compared, win-loss records compared, team rosters compared. Cheeseheads would go deep into the weeds of quarterback ratings, QB deployment, importance of the signal-caller to game outcomes. In a weird way, it would almost be like the Packers were *playing* the Jets each week. There would be that much dual scrutiny. Fun for Aaron Rodgers, Favre's 24-year-old successor. Fun for Packers management.

But what kind of season would the Favre-less Packers have in 2008? Considering that they went 13–3 in 2007, came one play from reaching the Super Bowl, had nearly all their players and the same coaching staff back, the year figured to be a pretty good one. Nine or ten regular-season wins and a playoff victory or two—that was my guess. But it could be even better. It could be Hollywood-movie better. Rodgers, Favre's untested Cal-Berkeley understudy, could seize his big chance, stand firm under the pressure of succeeding a legend and lead the Pack to a spectacular season—all the way to Tampa Bay and the Bowl that is super. Could happen. And this book would be along for the ride.

Then again, maybe it wouldn't be a movie. Maybe the team would struggle. Pro football is like that—clubs up one year, down the other, for reasons we all can rattle off: injuries, personnel misfires, coaching stumbles, a tipped pass here, a stuffed run there, a doinked field goal. It wasn't a cliché the first time someone said that football was a game of inches. It was wise, the first time someone said this. Very wise.

I spent training camp evenings devouring books that chronicled an NFL team for a single season. Not being a pro sportswriter (just a passionate sports fan/ESPN junkie with a background in writing

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and love for summer softball and pickup basketball), I needed some examples. It was interesting noting how some authors hit the jackpot and chose teams that went all the way to the Super Bowl, while other authors hitched their wagons to teams that began their seasons with high hopes but then went south. Dick Schaap had the golden touch. He teamed with Packers guard Jerry Kramer for the 1968 classic *Instant Replay: The Green Bay Diary of Jerry Kramer*, taking readers inside the Packers' third straight championship season in '67. Returning to Green Bay almost thirty years later, he followed the Favre-led 1996 team in *Green Bay Replay: The Packers Return to Glory*. Maybe he goes with a different subtitle if the Packers don't end up beating the New England Patriots in Super Bowl XXXI.

John Feinstein's *Next Man Up: A Year Behind the Lines of Today's NFL* chronicled the 2004 Baltimore Ravens. Though their fate wasn't decided until the regular season's final hour, the 9–7 Ravens missed the playoffs. For *A Few Seconds of Panic: A 5-Foot-8, 170-Pound, 43-Year-Old Sportswriter Plays in the NFL*, Stefan Fatsis of the *Wall Street Journal* spent the summer of 2006 training as a placekicker with the Broncos, then checked in with the team during the season. Like the 2008 Packers, Denver was coming off a 13–3 year and trip to the conference championship. They started out red-hot at 7–2 but lost five of their last seven games, including a Week 17 heartbreaker in overtime, to finish 9–7 and out of the playoffs.

Then there was Roy Blount Jr.'s rollicking account of the '73 Steelers, *About Three Bricks Shy of a Load: A Highly Irregular Lowdown on the Year the Pittsburgh Steelers Were Super but Missed the Bowl*. Blount—no relation to Steelers defensive back Mel—was a *Sports Illustrated* staff writer at the time and followed the colorful Steelers during a 10–4 season in which they made the playoffs, but lost in the first round to Oakland.

INTRODUCTION: “WE’RE AT THE GAME”

As the 2008 season started, I promised myself that no matter how the Packers did, I was going to write a certain kind of book, one that never gets too heavy of touch, one mixing coverage of the games and players with Packer Nation travels and a look at Packer fandom in this time of change and disunion. Also, I wanted a book in tune with the joy of Packer game days in Green Bay, a joy beginning three or four hours before kickoff, the tailgating and street parties for a dozen blocks around Lambeau reaching Mardi Gras–like levels of merriment. People eat, drink, dance, laugh. They paint their faces green and gold. They wear Packer-colored beads. *No matter what*, I vowed, *I’m keeping the joy*. I kept the joy.

Like the Kramer/Schaap, Fatsis, and Blount books, *Life After Favre* is written in the first person. I moved from L.A. to Green Bay in 2008 to follow the Packers. I caught all eight home games at Lambeau. I hit all eight tailgate extravaganzas. By chance, not design, the one game I watched from the comfort of the Lambeau press box—the Houston contest, December 7—turned out to be the coldest of the season. Three degrees with whipping winds at kickoff. I did thermal penance by shoveling snow from the Lambeau bleachers on another brutally cold December day—me and 300 others.

I journeyed to Green Bay, but journeyed away from it as well. I ended up logging 5,000 road miles and 4,000 through the air following the team and pursuing adventures in Packer Land. I attended road games at the Metrodome and Superdome. I caught other away games in small-town Wisconsin taverns 200 miles from Green Bay. I watched the Tennessee Titans game in a bar and grill owned by rookie receiver Jordy Nelson’s parents in rural Kansas. I caught the second Bears game in Mabel Murphy’s, a year-round Packers bar in Scottsdale that’s the proud home of the Arizona Packer Backers. Until diving into this book, I hadn’t understood the full scope and breadth of Packer Nation.

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Not only does it extend to every corner of Wisconsin, it thrives in cheesehead outposts from coast to coast.

The team granted me locker room access, let me watch a late-season practice, helped arrange interviews with Aaron Rodgers and teammates, and assisted in numerous other ways during my three months in Green Bay. They did not hand me an all-access pass, however. Nor did I expect them to. Even in a normal year, the Packers, like all NFL teams, are sparing when it comes to giving writers access to their inner workings, wanting to protect game strategies, player privacy, the free flow of team communication, and more. Even in a normal year, the Packers say no to some would-be chroniclers, as they, along with several other NFL teams, did in 2005 when approached by Stefan Fatsis for his book. And this was no normal year. No, not one that saw the team hire former Bush White House press secretary Ari Fleischer to advise on media strategy during what some came to call “Favre-Gate,” the controversy surrounding the team’s divorce from Brett Favre. I worried the Packers might turn me down altogether. But they did not, and for that I was grateful.

* * *

It's not whether you get knocked down, it's whether you get up.

The title of champion may from time to time fall to others more than ourselves, but the heart, the spirit, and the soul of champions remains in Green Bay.

The Green Bay Packers never lost a football game. They just ran out of time.

INTRODUCTION: "WE'RE AT THE GAME"

Vince Lombardi. Words to motivate, words to swell a Packer fan's heart. More than once during the season, especially late in the season, I found myself thinking of his words, his famous words. The line about *never losing, just running out of time* came in handy a couple times. So did something I heard in Lambeau Field the day the Packers played the Carolina Panthers. It was November 30, an overcast day threatening snow. I was seated in row 54, section 115, six aluminum bleachers from the top of the stadium's bowl. Sitting two rows below me was a rosy-cheeked, convivial guy in his thirties wearing a grass-green ski hat with a tiny tassel. He sat with four beer-drinking friends. He was the comedian in the group, cracking his friends up. But he also said something that stayed with me, words I remembered that night after the game. They came in handy, too.

"Whatever happens," he said to his friends before kickoff, raising his beer in a toast, "we're at the game." A few minutes later he said it again, and toasted again. He ended up saying it four or five more times, including once or twice during the game when something bad happened from a Packers perspective. "Hey, we're at the game." He said it with a smile. He said it with humor in his voice. He knew it was funny the way he kept repeating himself, and he may have been a little drunk, but you also felt he meant what he said. And you thought you knew what he meant. Something along the lines of: Here we are at Lambeau Field, with beverages, watching a game between our beloved Pack and a very good team in the Panthers, and we don't know what's going to happen in the end. There's a lot in life and in the world to worry about right now, but being here, right now, all of us, watching the Pack, at Lambeau—this is not one of those things.

That was the meaning of his mantra.

I try to take that attitude in this book.

We're at the game.



PART ONE:
ORIENTATION



CHAPTER 1: LOMBARDI WAS HERE

THE PACKERS USED to have their offices right down there,” said Jason Vanden Heuvel, pointing floorward and a little to the left. We were standing in a beige-toned Quality Inn & Suites extended-stay studio apartment overlooking Crooks Street just off the corner of Washington Street in downtown Green Bay. It was a sunny day in late September. Light streamed in south-facing windows looking out over a corner tavern toward the Mason Street Bridge.

Did he just say what I think he said?

“Yeah,” Jason affirmed, his stocky frame clad in a dark green Quality Inn golf shirt and khaki pants. Jason was 26, with a neatly trimmed G.I. Joe beard and ever-present glint of humor in his eyes. “Lombardi, coaches, film room, ticket office—everything was right here until they moved across the river to Lambeau in ’63. Or what became Lambeau. They were still calling it City Stadium then.”

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I nearly cartwheeled. I'd had no idea. I picked this place because it offered three-month leases, free breakfast, a fitness room, and a pool. I liked being a football's toss from the Fox River. I also liked being downtown, though downtown Green Bay is barely ten square blocks. Lambeau Field was three miles away. I was already looking forward to jogging over there a few times a week, imagining myself running across the Mason Street Bridge up to Oneida Street then down Oneida to Lombardi Avenue and the mecca of football. At night, the stadium would be a welcome sight. Plus, I could quickly replenish the burned calories with a half-pound cheeseburger and mug of beer at Curly's Pub inside the Lambeau Atrium, its wall of windows overlooking the fenced-in team parking lot nicknamed "The Cage."

But to learn I'd be living in more or less the same spot Vincent T. Lombardi spent so many workdays during the years in which he game-planned his first two NFL championships—that had to be good luck, right? It might even carry more mojo than the Wilson NFL football signed by Bart Starr in 1974 that I was going to put on my writing table for inspiration. "To the Hanrahans—With Best Wishes—Bart Starr," wrote the great Lombardi-era Packers quarterback and soon-to-be Packers coach. The occasion was a Packers evening at the Milwaukee Athletic Club. I was ten. I got to shake Bart's hand.

"Lombardi met Hornung here for the first time," continued Jason, referring to Hall of Fame Packers halfback Paul Hornung. "The team even used to bunk some players in rooms down the hall." Jason Vanden Heuvel was only the latest unofficial Packers historian I'd met in the past two months coming up here weekly from Milwaukee, 120 miles south. I'd already met Ray Nitschke's former paperboy, a friend of the farmer whose cow pasture became Lambeau Field, and a guy whose dad used to fish with Curly Lambeau. The same guy who used to deliver papers to Nitschke also "peddled pop" from a crate fixed to

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his one-speed bike. He said one day a man called out, “Hey kid, how about a soda!” He turned around and it was Paul Hornung sitting in his white 1959 Cadillac DeVille.

I also met a young woman who shared a story about a more recent former Packer, the “former” something we were all still getting used to. Her name was Becky Van Kauwenberg. We were seated along one side of the square bar at the center of the Stadium View, a sports fan’s paradise located a block from Lambeau Field, around the corner from Brett Favre’s Steakhouse. “One day Brett came by my parents’ dairy farm to get some hay for his deer blind,” recalled Becky, 24, her brown eyes glowing with the memory. “The farm’s in Seymour, about twenty miles from here. Brett was going hunting. He asked the Packers equipment guy if he knew where to get some bales. This guy knows my brother—that was the connection. Unfortunately, I wasn’t home that day! Only my mom was there. She said Brett pulled up to the barn in a white pickup. He was wearing an old *NYPD Blue* T-shirt and those shorts he always wears. It was either 2003 or 2004. The year he had the broken thumb.”

I probably just could have yelled, “Hey, when did Brett break his thumb?” and forty people would have shouted “2003!” As a Packers fan I should know this information, however, so I didn’t yell. While I wish I was, I’m not one of those cheesehead *Rain Man* types who even behind six beers can tell you the fourth-string running back from the 1984 Forrest Gregg-coached 8–8 Packers squad. (It was Ray Crouse, by the way. I looked it up.) It’s a lame excuse but I missed some osmosis opportunities spending all but five of the past twenty-five years outside of Wisconsin, living in Vermont, England, and North Carolina before New York and California. When I got home I checked the date of the Favre fracture. It was October 19, 2003. Favre slammed his thumb on a Packer lineman’s shoulder pad early

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in a game at St. Louis and toughed it out, completing 23 of 32 passes for 268 yards in a 34–24 loss. Eschewing surgery, he furthered his Iron Man reputation by playing the rest of the season with a broken, splinted thumb, recording his best-ever completion percentage at 64.5 and throwing a league-leading 32 touchdown passes.

“Because of the thumb, Brett had to be careful grabbing the bales,” Becky continued, finishing her story. “I guess he made some jokes about being a wimp. After he got the bales in his pickup, my mom gave him something to drink in our farmhouse. We have a picture of Brett Favre standing in our kitchen!”

It’s only a slight exaggeration to say everyone you meet in Green Bay or the surrounding environs has some personal Packers story or link to Packers history. A few days after moving into the hotel, I’d meet Jason’s colleague Peter Burkel, 24, a sunshiny lobby presence with round, gray plastic glasses and a brush-cut. Like Becky, Peter grew up on a dairy farm. Besides knowing the longtime Catholic chaplain to the Packers, the Reverend Jim Baraniak—“Father Jim” to Peter and the Packers, he holds services for the Packers the morning of every game—Peter is also the grandson of an early Lambeau-era Packers water boy. His granddad, Louis Conard, was a high school classmate of Curly Lambeau’s at Green Bay East. Right there at the start of Packers history, Curly hired Louis to keep those leatherhead Packers hydrated.

Before Jason and I headed back to the front desk at the other end of this low, block-long hotel, he asked what kind of book I was writing. I filled him in, mentioning the travel and focus on fans along with games and players. “Should be fun,” I added. “Just be a total cheesehead for three months.” Memorably, Jason replied, “Kind of like gonzo journalism—with the Packers.” I believe I barked out a laughing

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semi-yes. I hadn't been expecting a nod to Hunter S. Thompson in a Green Bay hotel room, especially since we'd just been talking about Lombardi, a.k.a. "St. Vince." Jason, it turns out, is a big reader and might go into writing himself. I suggested that the book probably wouldn't be *Fear and Loathing in Green Bay*, but that I would certainly be open to the unplanned, and would also have to "research" a few Packer bars.

"Can I just say," said Jason, growing serious a moment, "that despite what the national media seems to be saying, not everyone in Green Bay is running around with FIRE TED THOMPSON and BRING BACK BRETT signs." Thompson, the Packers general manager since 2005, is the individual who, in the end, had the final say regarding whether or not Favre remained a Packer. There was—there is—no love lost between Thompson and Favre backers.

"You're going to talk about that, right?" Jason asked. "I mean, there are plenty of Packer fans—plenty of people in this town—who are glad Aaron Rodgers is our quarterback and think Thompson made the right decision. It's just that Favre people make the most noise."

I told Jason that, yes, I would definitely be talking about this.

We left the second-floor apartment. We stepped out rear doors used mainly by the extended-stay residents and patrons of the new hotel restaurant, Cheffetta's. Jason had already told me that one of the Cheffetta's dining rooms used to be Lombardi's office during his first four years as Packers coach. It was here the great Brooklyn-born motivator came each workday promptly at 9 A.M. after attending 8 A.M. Mass at St. Willebrord's Catholic Church two blocks away on Adams Street. Standing on sunny Crooks Street with our backs to the South End Pub & Grill, the corner tavern my apartment windows would overlook, we regarded the elegant two-story red-brick edifice occupied

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by the Packers from 1950 until 1963. Built in 1914 as the Marvin Building, the compact corner structure became part of the hotel some years back. It's a quiet corner, and it would become even quieter a few weeks hence when the Green Bay Chamber of Commerce moved from its home across Washington Street in a former riverfront train depot, all round-arched windows and brown-brick facades, to a new glass-and-steel development three blocks north. But when the Packers were here, this was a happening place. The thoroughfare named for our first president (presidents and trees gave downtown Green Bay its street names: Adams and Walnut, Monroe and Pine) used to be the city's main drag—its shopping street, restaurant street, theater street, parade street. The Meyer, Green Bay's grandest theater, an art deco former movie palace now used mainly for concerts and stage productions, is pretty much all that's left from Washington Street's heyday. Unless you count, and I do, diminutive Al's Hamburgers five doors down, a squat, stucco-faced diner about the size of a mobile home.

EAT commands Al's neon sign in big gold letters, its date of establishment, 1934, in smaller gold numerals below. "Lombardi used to eat lunch there," Quality Inn manager Deb McAllister would tell me as I signed my lease. I stopped by Al's as part of my subsequent explore-the-neighborhood walk, and sure enough, there was a small framed photo of Lombardi on the wall along with a Lombardi sketch. Three wooden booths, eight counter stools, and a menu of burgers, chops, fried chicken, and hash—that was Al's. The ghost of Edward Hopper would feel welcome. "In the Holmgren years some Packers used to come here," said floral-bloused Judy Rank, 70, as she topped off my cup of coffee at the counter. "Especially if they needed to bulk up. Gilbert used to come in," Judy added, referring to 350-pound former Packers nose tackle Gilbert Brown, a run-stuffing behemoth

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from the '96 Super Bowl team. "Breakfast and lunch. He could really put it away."

Between Al's Hamburgers and my new hotel home a block south was another sign bearing a year of origin, though this one went back a little further than FDR's first term. "On the river shore directly west of this marker about the year 1745," began the inscription on an old bronze plaque set in a low brick wall on the west side of Washington Street. It told of a French Canadian fur trader named Augustin Langlade who with son Charles built a house and trading post here. The plaque calls them "the first permanent settlers of Wisconsin." That explained Langlade Street five blocks from Lambeau. I'd come to learn that the younger Langlade is considered nothing less than "The Father of Wisconsin." I'm sure I learned this in grade school, but like the year Favre broke his thumb, it had dropped out of my head. Writing this book helped restore some data.

Train tracks no longer exist on the east side of the river (in place of the rails is a riverfront jogging path), but they remain on the west bank, and slow-rolling freight trains would be a regular sight as I gazed across the river or jogged across one of the three downtown bridges. Train horns were common, too. The *click-click* rumble of the cars served as a reminder that Green Bay was still an industrial city, though not as much as it was in the early Packer years of Curly Lambeau. In the 1920s, the railroads and the river and the bay leading into Lake Michigan and beyond, in concert with Wisconsin's pastureland and forests, made this small city the world's leading producer of milk, cheese, and toilet paper. Luckily there was some meatpacking, too, or Lambeau's pigskin startup might have been tagged with a dairy-themed moniker, or even something TP-related. Think that's a stretch? Thirty miles downriver, the Kimberly High football team is called the Papermakers. A state power in football that enters the 2009 season

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on a 28-game winning streak, Kimberly's mascot is a paper wasp, an image with more sting than a guy churning a vat of newsprint pulp.

While this east riverbank no longer has an industrial footprint along the eight-block length of downtown, warehouses and factories still line the west bank. And just south of the Mason Street Bridge rise pyramids of piled coal, huge black planetary dunes that become something else entirely when it snows, transforming into white pastoral hills. These coal mountains were around when Lombardi was here. He drove past them every time he took the Mason Street Bridge from his Crooks Street office to the stadium where he built his legend.

Ivory plumes of steam rise from the manifold smokestacks poking heavenward alongside steeples in this town of churches and bars, just as in Lombardi's day. Cottony cumulus on blue, they do something almost sublime to a cloudless winter sky when it's frigid, best viewed from a bridge.

No doubt there were fewer crystalline winter days then, though, with more smoke, more smell, coming from those stacks along with steam. And when Lombardi looked out the window of his Crooks Street office, he didn't see riverfront parkland with a running path, gazebo, and small wooden docks for pleasure craft visiting the Fox Harbor Pub & Grill opposite the former Marvin Building. He saw riverfront railroad tracks. The train depot itself, built in 1898 in a Flemish renaissance style, had been shuttered by the Milwaukee Road in 1957 but it would be decades before the river frontage became green and the river itself began to revive.

On permanent display at the Neville Public Museum located on the west riverbank just south of the Ray Nitschke Bridge is an exhibit—encompassing a whole wing of the museum—called “Hometown Advantage: The Packers and the Community.” It's highlighted by five

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short films mixing interviews and archival footage ranging over nine Packer decades. Together, the films vividly illustrate the team's intimate connection to the city. "There's been a history of the community saving our team," says former Packers chief operating officer John Jones, referring to a series of decisive moments when public monetary support got the team back on sounder financial footing: 1922, the Depression-era early '30s, 1949, the 1997 Packers stock sale, and most recently the county-wide referendum in 2000 approving a half-cent sales tax that raised millions for the Lambeau upgrade. Bankruptcy loomed three times in this citizen-owned, not-for-profit franchise's first three decades until the community rallied. The Packers, in one telling historical footnote, were the only small-town professional football team to survive the Great Depression.

Some day down the road, it's conceivable the Neville will devote a whole exhibit to the Favre years, and to No. 4 himself—his mark on the team, place in Packers history, importance to the community, and painful departure, one that sharply divided the Green Bay community. History was made when the Packers traded Favre, when Brett became a Jet. For now, museumgoers can only reflect on perspectives offered in regard to the previous dramatic departures in Packers history, those of Curly Lambeau and Vince Lombardi, while recognizing that these parallels are imperfect, as these men elected to leave and Favre . . . well, it was more complicated.

"After Lambeau defected to Chicago, the Packers went eleven years without a winning season," says then 81-year-old Lee Rummel in one of the exhibit's films. A former *Green Bay Press-Gazette* Packers reporter turned longtime Packers public relations director, Rummel is perhaps our greatest living repository of Packers knowledge. Rummel goes on to refer to an "eleven-year famine" that followed Curly's leave-taking, a deprivation ending only when, in 1959, former New

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York Giants offensive coach Lombardi arrived in town after a pitiful one-win Packers season. A second, longer deprivation followed after Lombardi's exit—29 years without a championship. Some of the post-Lombardi seasons were downright ugly, years some Packers fans refer to as “The Gory Years” when compared to the Glory Years Lombardi rang in.

How did Green Bay feel when their savior coach himself defected for a big-city team? “It was very devastating when Lombardi left,” Rempel says. “It was a shock to us all.”

These two Packer skids—green and gold droughts—that followed the departures of two men who brought world-class winning to Green Bay had to be in the back of the Collective Cheesehead Mind when Favre was traded to New York. Would another famine follow?