Memories of Shibe Park

There are pieces of music that transport me back in time, vivid memories of places and events that occurred long ago. Other people have the same experience with sights, sounds or even smells. When Bob Skilton began working on this article about Shibe Park, an obscure baseball field that was torn down years ago, it didn't occur to me that it was more than his recollections, that while he worked and reworked these memories he was, for awhile at least, back on those streets with his childhood friends watching the greats of another generation.

Like always, Bob went through many drafts of the article until he had each word to his satisfaction. In fact, he worked on this article and several others after his illness had been diagnosed as terminal.

Bob was my friend and one of the most gentle and gentlemanly persons I could ever know. His mind was active, his eyes retained their twinkle and his wit was intact to the end.

There are other memorials and tributes to Bob in this magazine and in other publications, but I chose to publish his memories of baseball because now I know where Bob has gone — back to the streets of Philadelphia with his friends, watching Connie Mack and his other heroes.

Editor

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Shibe Park...For sixty-one years from 1909 to 1970, this ballpark was the scene of so many memorable doings in the saga of major league baseball in Philadelphia! It was renamed "Connie Mack Stadium" in 1953. The next year—late in 1954—the Athletics moved to Kansas City and the Phillies—there since 1938—became the sole occupants. In 1970 the Phillies took their baseball games to Veterans Stadium and left only a vacant shell that was eventually gutted by fire and then torn down.

"Connie Mack Stadium it was eventually called, but I shall always remember it by its original name, "Shibe Park." It was "Shibe Park" when the Athletics (the A's for short) played there, under the management of the famous Connie Mack.

When I was in the 7th and 8th grades—a good many years ago now—some of the best times in those years involved Shibe Park. Let me explain. The school I went to was at 23rd and Cambria Streets, not far from Shibe Park. I had a classmate named Earl who lived with his family on 20th Street between Lehigh and Somerset, and this, I found, was a very special location.

What was so special about 20th Street between Lehigh and Somerset? There was nothing special about the type of housing. Visualize a block-long series of row houses—two-story houses, joined together with party walls—no space between—look somewhat like a single structure with separate front porches and entrances for each housing unit, and each unit featuring a bay window at the front of the second floor. This pattern is repeated thousands of times throughout Philadelphia. But these were not mere apartments or flats, as in New York City. Each unit was a separate house, and at that time, almost all were owner-occupied homes maintained with tender loving care. The neighborhood around 20th Street, as was typical, had its own life and character, and tended to be self-sufficient, with a variety of small stores located on the corners. Philadelphia was rightly called the City of Homes. There were few cars then, and the kids could play in the streets.

What made the block of 20th Street between Lehigh and Somerset special was that the houses were on only one side of the street (the east side), and, on the other side was the right field wall of Shibe Park, about twelve feet high. And from the bay windows on the second floor of most of the houses, you could look out over the wall and see almost the entire field of play. (The grandstands and bleachers were on the other three sides of the field.)

Now and then Earl would ask me if I wanted to go after school to his home to see the balance of the ball game. (All games, except for a rare morning game, were in the afternoon. Night baseball came much later.) My acceptance was immediate, enthusiastic. When we arrived

at Earl's upstairs bay window, the game would have progressed to the fourth or fifth inning—that left about half of the game to see. It was free, great entertainment.

It was the making of an incurable baseball "fan"—incurable, yes, although with the years this "fan" has become sadder and wiser, and for him the term "fan" is no longer short for "fanatic."

From that time on, I followed the A's through thick and thin, great years and lean years, as long as they remained in Philadelphia. Interest began at a propitious time. It was exciting to see the team go up the ladder. After being habitual denizens of the cellar (the championship years 1910–1914 long past) the Athletics, beginning about 1922, improved, player by player, until the time came when they surpassed the New York Yankees while the Yankees were still in their glory with Babe Ruth, Lou Gehrig, and the rest of that redoubtable team.[1]

It was a great team, with many great players. For example:

Jimmie Foxx, with a 1929 batting average of .354 and 33 home runs,
Bing Miller, .335 ba, 16 hr
Al Simmons, .365 ba, 34 hr
Mule Haas, .313 ba, 16 hr
Jimmy Dykes, .327 ba, 16 hr
Mickey Cochrane, .331 ba, 7 hr

The team batting average in 1929 was .296. (All this, at a time before the introduction of the helmet giving protection to the head.)

Pitchers in 1929 included:

Lefty Grove–won 20 lost 6, 2.82 earned run average,
George Earnshaw, won 21 lost 8, 3.28 era
Rube Walberg, won 18 lost 11, 3.59 era

(This before relief pitching became a vital part of the game. Grove had 21 complete games, Walberg 20, and Earnshaw was low with 13.)[2] Of the above, eventually Foxx, Simmons, Cochrane, and Grove were elected to the Baseball Hall of Fame.

In 1929 the A's went to the World Series as champions of the American League. They repeated in 1930 and 1931. In 1929 and 1930, they won the World Series. In 1931 they lost to the St. Louis Cardinals, who surprised them with the phenomenal performance of a team starring the little-known Pepper Martin.

The salaries the players received in those days seem quite modest compared with what a great many baseball players are getting today, even when taking into account inflation and the cheapening of the dollar. In those days the bargaining power of players vis-a-vis the owners was severely restricted because a "reserve clause" in all major league baseball player contracts, upheld by the courts, had the effect of giving the clubs career rights in the players, so that a player could not counter his club salary offer with a threat to play on another major league baseball team making a better offer. The prospect of becoming a free agent with vastly enlarged bargaining power is a comparatively recent development, as a result of an arbitrator's decision in 1975.[3]

Without having the figures, my guess is that the average annual salary of the 1929 A's was something like $10,000.[4]

Of course, comparisons between then and now can mean little, considering the differences in taxes, prices and wages. In those days, for those times, some baseball players were well-paid. Babe Ruth super-superstar, was getting the highest salary in baseball in the early thirties—something like $70,000-plus for the season. That was a lot of money for the time. The story goes that when he was setting home run records he was introduced to President Hoover. The Depression was spreading disaster. A friend accompanying the Babe commented on the Babe's nonchalance in meeting the President of the United States, and asked him to explain the fact that the Babe was getting more pay than the President. The Babe replied: "Well, he didn't have a good year."

With the swollen player contracts of the last few years, made possible in part by a team's sometimes greatly increased revenue from licensing TV broadcasting of games, the anecdote about Babe Ruth and President Hoover loses its punch. Today's superstars may expect to be paid about six or seven million dollars a year. Such amounts could top not only the President's salary, but also a good part of his staff thrown in. But perhaps with a shrug you might say, "What of it? The President didn't have a good year." On some teams the average player salary may, in 1993, become $2,000,000![5] So if you took all of the team's pay together, you could pay the salaries of the entire 100-member U.S. Senate, and still have plenty to distribute to keep the players miles away from the bread line. But perhaps this is as it should be. The United States Senate, you might observe, didn't have a good year.

Yes, the A's were a great team—one of the greatest. But it could have been an even greater team if organized Baseball had not systematically excluded blacks from playing on its teams. Until 1947, when Jackie Robinson became the first black to play in the major leagues in modern times, the color barrier meant that the major leagues deprived themselves of doubtless some of the best players in the game who from want of more lucrative opportunities played in their own leagues. No statistics were kept to memorialize their accomplishments. Thus, famous though some of the stars were at the time, their fame was confined and short-lived.[6] Although from 1972 on a few such once legendary black players have been admitted to Baseball's Hall of Fame, usually posthumously, there come to mind lines from Gray's Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard—that classic tribute to and lament for the unsung:

"Nor you, ye proud, impute to these the fault
If Memory o'er their tomb no trophies raise."

The A's rise to the top did not bring the expected financial rewards to Connie Mack and the Shibes—the owners of the A's. The Great Depression, (1929–1939) fully underway, hit Philadelphia's economic activity hard, and caused low attendance at home games as it continued. Connie Mack was far from being an ultra-rich multimillionaire able to operate a baseball franchise as a luxury showpiece of an investment portfolio (as is now so often the case), nor were the Shibes, although well-to-do. They were instead old-type baseball entrepreneurs who counted on operating the franchise as a profit-making concern and did not intend to lose important money. There was predictable consequence. To pay off debts, the A's sold most of their star players to

other teams. In 1935, only a few of the players of the championship years remained on the roster.

In that year—1935—a long-standing source of irritation was removed—interlopers at the money trough. From the beginning of baseball at Shibe Park the owners of some of the houses on 20th Street had taken advantage of their special location to make money by erecting stands on their roofs and charging admission to see the ball games from rooftop and bay window. During the long, lean years after the first championship A's team (1910–1914) was dismantled, the pickings were modest. A friend recalls that when he sat on the roof, admission was 25¢ versus 55¢ for a bleacher seat inside the park. Business picked up when the A's left the cellar and started their climb. And when the World Series came to Shibe Park, the roof structures expanded. Once modest profits for rooftop seating became fabulous profits.[7]

Obviously, the Shibes and Connie Mack didn't like what they saw—people making money from values generated by the A's, sometimes at the expense of gate receipts. Lawyers might describe what was happening as a syphoning-off activity, persons getting a "free commercial ride: out of the efforts of others (the A's) to which they did not contribute, and debate whether there was any legal injury for which a court should grant a remedy.[8] Finally reacting, the Shibes and Connie Mack took matters into their own hands, and caused the right field wall to be raised to such height that the view of the playing field was completely cut off from the 20th Street houses.

Impartially, the WALL cast its gloom and affected the lives of all on 20th Street. It was there Spring, Summer, Fall and Winter—all the time—and not just for the 77 times a year while the A's were playing at home (the season was 154 games then).

The shadow of the WALL fell not only on the profit-makers. From that time on, no Earl could invite his friend to see the games from an upstairs bay window.

Did the owners of the A's overreact?[9] Assuming that they could not erect that wall out of sheer spitefulness—I refer to the law governing "spite fences"[10]—did they have sufficient justification for raising that wall, thus diminishing their neighbor's enjoyment of light and air? Objecting Twentieth Streeters litigated in vain.[11] There was an ironic twist. To many a batter, especially a left-handed one, this high wall turned out to be a Monster. Many a hit that formerly would have been a home run now failed to leave the park, and instead, as it bounced off the wall, could be held to a single or at most a double. If a homer-hungry batter tried to hit the ball over that wall with an uppercut swing, he could psych himself into frustration and see his batting average tumble. Shibe Park, alas, had changed.

When the beloved A's skipped town (1954), the deserted A's fans had nowhere to turn to, except to try to transfer their affections to those former enemies—the Philadelphia Phillies, as the sole occupants of Shibe Park, now called Connie Mack Stadium. It did not come easy. Herman Fly, a fictional veteran A's fan in James Michener's "Sports in America"[12] could not make the transition and so gave up his interest in professional baseball. But for most, soon or late, the transition was made—helped by the rise of the Whiz Kids—stars such as Robin Roberts, Curt Simmons, Richie Ashburn, Puddin' Head Jones, Granny Hamner, Jim Konstanty, Del Ennis—to name some but not all. A succession of players in Phillies' uniforms added luster to the history of the Park.

The departure of the Phillies from the Park (1970), to go to the newly built Veterans Stadium several miles away in South Philadelphia, was in more than one respect anticlimactic—it was nothing compared to the loss of the A's to another city. Sure, there was nostalgia—the quest for mementos to recall days of glory at the park—but, to paraphrase one wit's observation, nostalgia wasn't what it used to be.

And so, as the playwright would say, exeunt, leaving only memories....the crack of the bat—the flight of the ball—the roar of the crowd—Action! Sunshine, and real grass, easy on the eyes, easy on the feet, through the hot days of summer. And the players—Ty Cobb, Babe Ruth, Jimmy Foxx, Lefty Grove, Mickey Cochrane—all the players—memories of Shibe Park.

ENDNOTES

*Professor of Law, Emeritus, Law School, University of Wisconsin. No doubt the continuation of an interest developed early in life, as described in these pages, prompted me in 1978 to accept the suggestion of the Assistant Dean John Ryan of McGeorge School of Law to offer a course in Sports Law at that school leading to my teaching Sports Law in six different law schools in ensuing years. Robert M. Sevastian, Esq., helped by supplying some materials.

1. In 1929 the A's won 104 games while losing only 46. "The Yankees were forced to rebuild inplaces and could not keep pace with the Athletics. Miller Huggins experimented on the left side of the infield, giving Leo Durocher a lot of time at shortstop, while coming up with a gem—catcher Bill Dickey. Good years from Babe Ruth, Lou Gehrig and Tony Lazzeri could carry the club no closer than a distant second." The Sports Encyclopedia: Baseball, Neft, Johnson, Deutsch, Grosset & Dunlap, N.Y. 1974 at 170.

2. These numbers come from op. cit. supra note 1.

3. See the discussion of Messerschmidt and McNally Arbitration proceedings in Sobel, Professional Sports, Law-Arts Publishers, Inc. Student Ed. 1977 at pages 201–218. The decision by Arbitrator Seitz, based on an interpretation of the Collective Bargaining Agreement undid the hold owners had on players, and in this respect obsoleted Organized Baseball's judicially created exemption from the federal antitrust laws. See Sobel, id. pages 1–81.

4. I base my guess on what the New York Yankees were paid. "By 1927 Ruth was earning $70,000, a tremendous amount in those pre-inflation low-tax days. To give some idea of the heights of that figure, the next highest salary on the club was Earle Combes' $19,500. Lou Gehrig earned $8,000. The average annual salary per man on the greatest team in history was approximately $11,000; take away Ruth's and it was closer to $8,000 per man."

Rafter and Honig, The Image of Their Greatness at 94, Crown Publishers 1979.

5. The way things are going in 1992, $2,000,000 as the average player salary may soon be on the low side for the big-spender teams. In 1992, "[S]eventeen of the 26 clubs averaged more than $1 million, with the New York Mets setting a record high of $1,707,769. The Los Angeles Dodgers were second at $1,613,821 and the Boston Red Sox third at $1,523,378." Associated Press Report, Wisconsin State Journal, 4–8–92 at 3 D. Major League Baseball, a system institutionally dependent on fanning the local loyalties of fans to support the teams, is played by players many of whom follow the free market economics of "have suitcase, will travel" where the big bucks lure. In this aspect, they may be no better or worse than some of the owners.

6. "Decade after decade saw the brilliant talent of such blacks as Cyclone Joe Williams, Cannonball Dick Redding, John Henry Lloyd, Cool Papa Bell, Oscar Charleston, Martin Dihago, Buck Leonard, Josh Gibson, Satchel Paige, and countless others wasted in the shadows and back alleys of baseball because of bigotry and injustice." Ritter & Honig, see note 4 at 197.

7. Bruce Kuklick, in his recent book "To Every Thing A Season" (Princeton University Press 1991 at 74) reports "estimates that ...three thousand people per game collected in the houses, paying from seven to twenty-five dollars per head."

8. In Pittsburgh Athletic Co. v. KQV Broadcasting Co. 24 F.Supp.490 (W.D. Pa 1938) a radio station, without the consent of the Pittsburgh Pirates, broadcast baseball games in process by witnessing them from a tall building close to the field of play, despite the fact that the Pirates had licensed another station to broadcast. The court granted an injunction against this form of unfair competition.

9. Quare as to the answer. The adjoining owners would have to get past black-letter law. "A landowner has no right to light and air from adjoining lands," 2 C.J.S. Adjoining Landowners, 68. "In the absence of statute or agreement, a landowner has no right to the view or prospect over adjoining land," id. 68. Of course, zoning and building codes often take over today.

10. "...wrongful intent, by the prevailing view, will make nuisances out of otherwise reasonable and lawful pursuits. [citing cases] This view assumes property rights to be relative and justifies activities that are harmful to adjoining lands only when such activities serve a useful purpose and the amount of interference from them is no larger than reasonably necessary for such purpose. To the extent that an operation is motivated by malice, it lacks utility and consequently fails to offset with social values the harm it causes to others. [citing cases] Accordingly, spite fences which are erected for the sole purpose of impairing the light, air and view of one's neighbor, [citing cases] and other activities which one fosters for malicious ends alone [citing cases] are actionable nuisances. The trend in this direction, moreover, has been accelerated by statutes and ordinances making spite fences and other structures nuisances per se [citing cases].

Where a structure is erected for a beneficial as well as a malicious purpose, the courts usually emphasize its lawful..." American Law of Property, 28.28, (Boston: Little Brown Co., 1954).

Perhaps the A's could have accomplished their purpose of protecting their financial interests, by less drastic measures, e.g., getting an injunction. See footnote 8 supra. Even if the reasons for raising the wall seem to a court objectively insufficient, there still remains the question whether the action must be shown to be "with malice."

11. Kuklick, op.cit.p.6 at 75.

12. Paperbook Ed. Fawcett Crest, 3–43.