

# George Brace

## Baseball's Foremost Photographer

by James D. Smith III

**G**eorge Brace officially retired from his vocation as a baseball photographer at 65. That number would hardly seem remarkable except for one fact: it wasn't his age, it was his years of service as a visual chronicler of America's national pastime. Through 1994, from his home base in Chicago, Brace captured more than half of major league baseball's years in pictures, leaving a priceless legacy to fans everywhere.

His technical skills were beyond question. In a January 2002 interview, Brace rehearsed for me the speed graphics used with a 55mm lens accommodating sunlight conditions at the 1933 All-Star Game. Closer to his heart, however, was the sport itself. He remembered with fondness corresponding as a kid with Hall of Fame immortal George Wright, reaching back to the 1869 Cincinnati Red Stockings. He also loved playing the game, recounting with delight days with the Westwood Badgers of 1924 (which he helped organize) and later teams. "I was always a big fan," he recalled, "and had a great time wherever I went."

George Brace was born on Chicago's South Side on April 11, 1913. His parents, Fred and Margaret (Ward) Brace, were die-hard Sox followers. Gradually, he became partial to the Windy City's more successful team, the Cubs—and in 1929 his big break came. That team needed photographs of the

players in their street clothes, and had previously worked with a local photographer named Francis Burke. Their phone call, however, reached George Burke, who (knowing little about baseball) took on Master Brace at 16 as an assistant. Together, until his mentor's death in 1951, they formed a partnership taking photographs of the Cubs, White Sox, and football's Chicago Bears. "For the first two years, I was in charge of the files, and then really got to know the craft." With Burke's passing, respect for Brace as a freelance photographer gained him continued access to Comiskey Park and Wrigley Field.

Brace and Burke teamed up as photographers for baseball's first official All-Star Game (NL vs. AL) in 1933. Held at Comiskey, "it was great, brand-new, and there was quite a bit of interest. Arch Ward organized it, but I never met him. I was about 20 years old, and Mr. Burke stationed me on the first base side with the camera. I was the closest one to Babe Ruth as he went back and forth from right field. And I was just behind my favorite player, Lou Gehrig." The memories flowed.

That game was a landmark in baseball history and began a cordial relationship with the Iron Horse which would last the remainder of his career. "He was the nicest guy you'd ever want to meet—didn't talk much, but was so considerate. I took a profile picture of him which Lou liked so much he ordered dozens of eight-by-tens. Another time, there were about 60 kids who had won a contest and showed up (from

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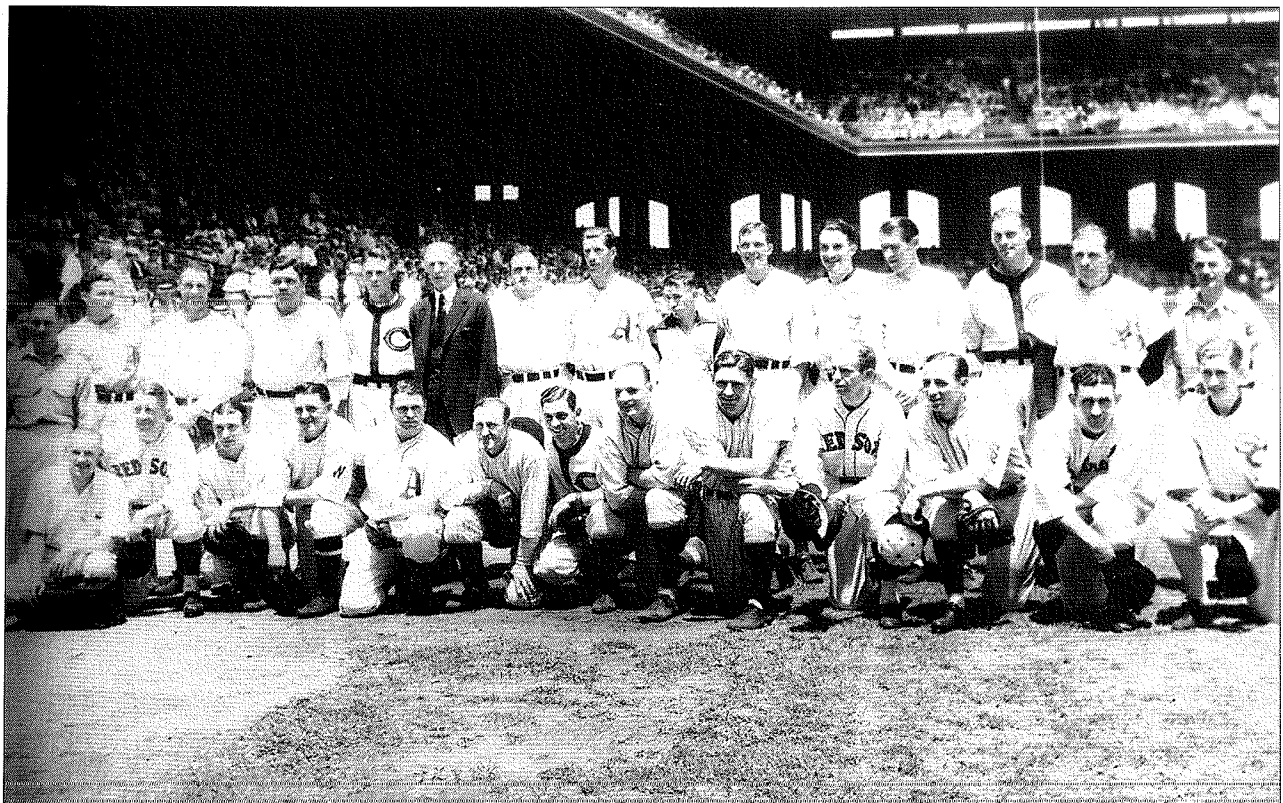
*Jim Smith has been a SABR member since 1982, and has contributed to a variety of publications. He would like to thank Mary Brace for her kindness in supplying photos and captions for this remembrance.*



## 1933 NATIONAL LEAGUE ALL-STAR TEAM

HARTNETT, WILSON, FRISCH, HUBBELL, WALKER, WANER, ENGLISH, SCHUMACHER, TRAYNOR, LOTSHAW,  
 HALLAHAN, BARTELL, TERRY, McKECHNIE, MCGRAW, CAREY, HAFEY, KLEIN, O'DOUL, BERGER.  
 HASBROOK, MARTIN, WARNEKE, CUCCINELLO.

*1933 AL/NL All-Stars: "Dad always paid close attention to detail, and the uniforms for the game caught his eye. The National Leaguers wore the league designation instead of their home team jerseys, and so he and Mr. Burke offered to take photos of each individual as a keepsake. It was the only year they did that with uniforms. History was being made right here in Chicago, at old Comiskey."*



Connecticut, I think) at a game and he posed with every single one.”

Meanwhile, on Chicago’s diamonds, Brace played ball through 1936. There was that late 1920s streak in which his team won 21 consecutive games, and CYO championship experiences to remember. There was also the 1933 tourney (coinciding with the World’s Fair) in which someone “introduced me as the world’s greatest official scorer.” Then there was softball—and employment which made possible his activities as a photographer. Brace worked during the swing shift at a Durkee Famous Foods processing plant on the North Side, leaving him free for day games. His goal was to attend at least one game in each Cubs and White Sox series—and the longtime Logan Square resident’s record was remarkable.

Over the years, Brace’s shutter captured an estimated 13,000 subjects on their trips through Chicago (players, managers, umpires, groundskeepers, ball boys, mascots, concessionaires, announcers, et al.), and historic moments such as the building of the bleachers and scoreboard at Wrigley Field and the 1937 ivy planting. “If they came to Chicago, I got ’em,” he told everyone, leaving hundreds of thousands of images.

In 1996, two years after eye and leg problems caused his retirement, Richard Cahan and Mark Jacob presented a selection of these gems of the times in *The Game That Was: The George Brace Baseball Photo Collection*. Jacob recalled the experience: “The thing most striking to me was how George viewed baseball as fun—not just a career, not just a way to make money, but simply as a beautiful sport that brought enjoyment to people.”

Even Brace couldn’t be everywhere. “The Negro Leagues brought some great teams to Chicago, and the East–West Classic was wonderful. But they had all their own photographers,” he told me. “So now and then I’d go down to the park on 39th and Wentworth just to watch games. I remember some early discussions about the Chicago Americans ordering lights.”

A World War II U.S. Army veteran, with his passing on June 15, 2002, Brace was survived by Agnes, his wife of 60 years. His son John and daughter Mary (who continues as proprietor of the collection) have vivid memories of baseball as part of their upbringing. Following the appearance of *The Game That Was*, there was long-deserved recognition (including the taping of an oral history at the Hall of Fame). Current Cubs photographer Stephen Green drew on George Brace’s half century of experience when he started

the job in 1982. “He had a reverie for the game and for photography that always impressed me. He taught me to approach these players not as stars but as people, like you and me, playing the world’s best game.”

The photographs in this article are from the George Brace Collection, and are available at [www.bracephoto.com](http://www.bracephoto.com).



*Bob Feller & Jeff Heath: “This was taken in the late 1930s. He came out from behind the camera to pose with two of Cleveland’s best—ballplayers and people. This shot became a sort of trademark for my dad. Anytime there was an article written about his work, he liked to have this photo used—so here it is one more time!”*

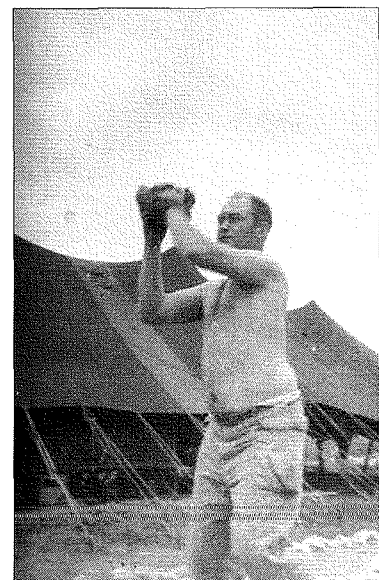
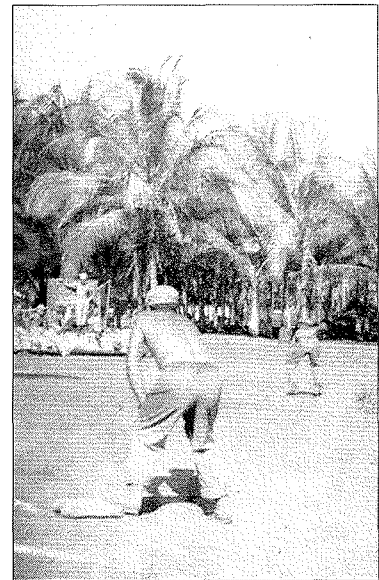
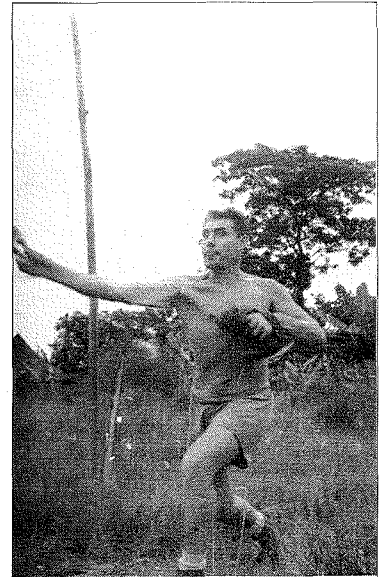


*Lou Gehrig: "This became Lou's favorite photo of himself to give out to the fans. Sometimes he'd order 500-1,000 at a time. Lou seemed to like the warmth that it conveyed, and he became Dad's favorite player . . . a very kind-hearted and wonderful man. His illness and death were such sad news to my father."*

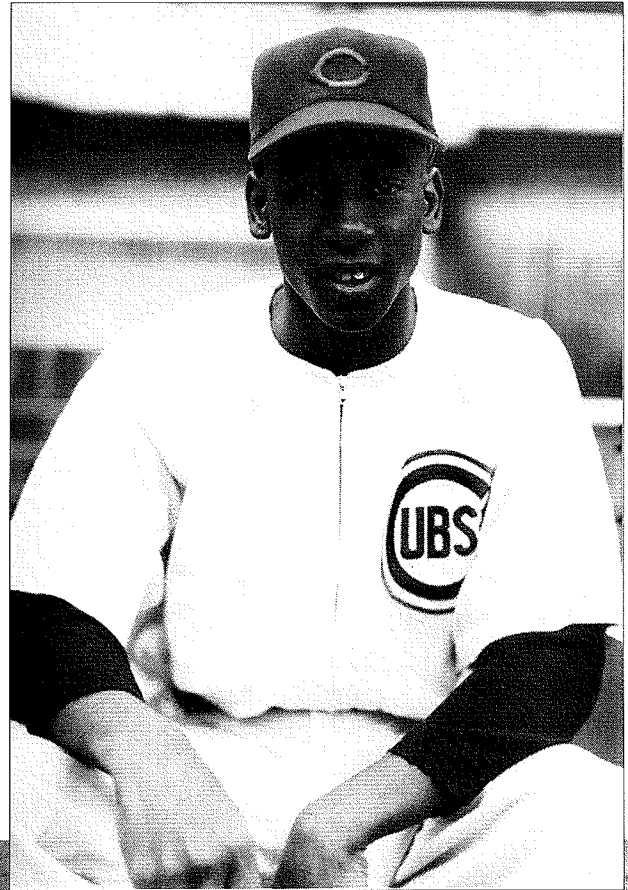


*Charlie Grimm & Cub: "Dad really had a great sense of humor, and especially enjoyed the promotions and 'doings' at Wrigley Field. Bill Veeck and the whole gang certainly had some ideas. Hey, like the book says, it was a game. There's so much fun in his pictures, something for all types!"*

*Wartime baseball: "The only time Dad missed an entire White Sox or Cubs series was during World War II, while he was in the U.S. Army in the Pacific. Even there, in New Guinea and the Philippines, he was snapping pictures. These are pretty rough, maybe taken with a box camera—and he used whatever was available to develop the negatives."*

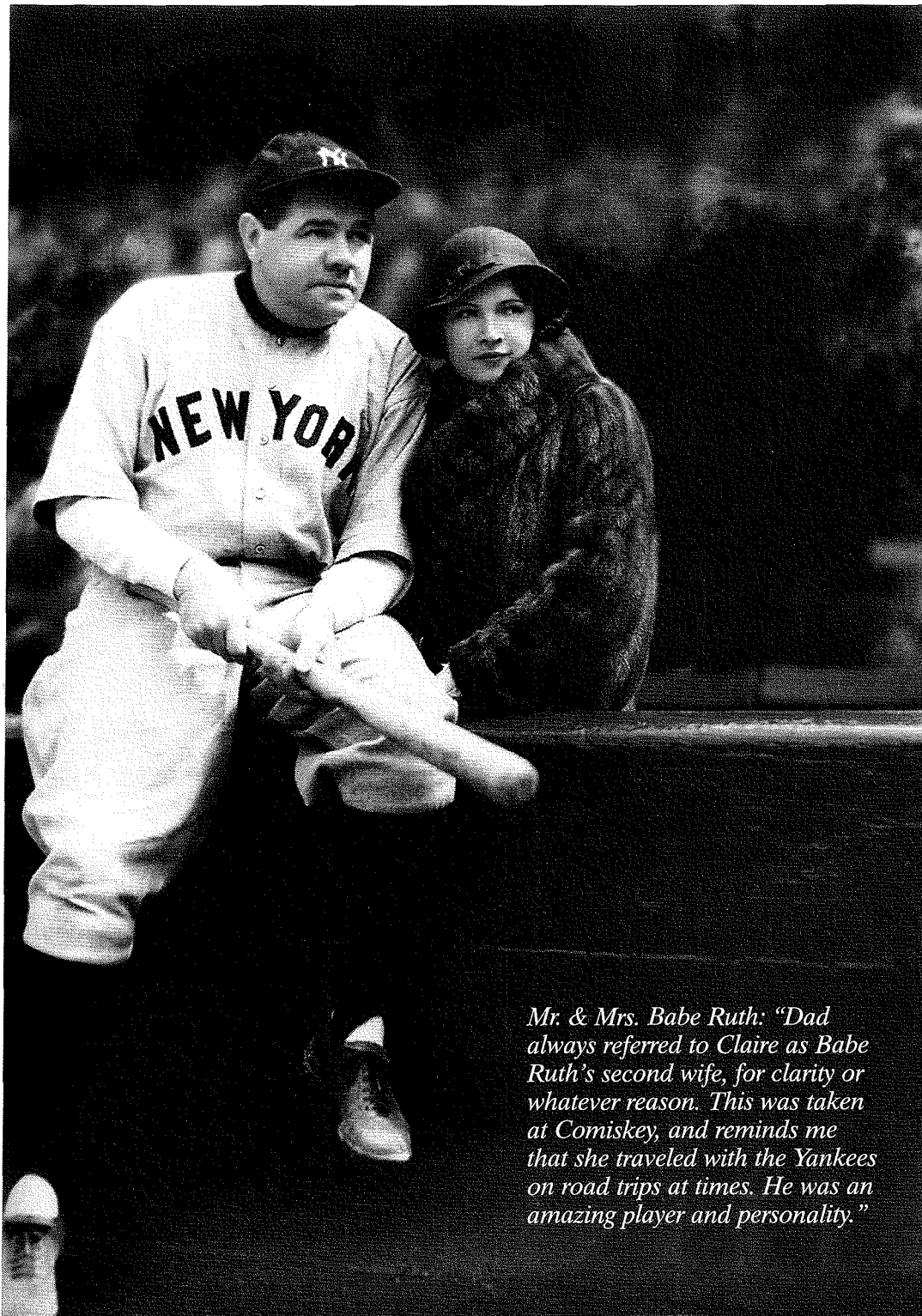


*Ernie Banks: "From the first day of his rookie year in 1953, Ernie Banks was a special subject. And after that wonderful career with the Cubs, he asked Dad to come to the Hall of Fame with him and photograph his favorites. Mr. Banks visited our home several times to pick up photographs."*



*Wrigley Field vines: "I grew up watching the building of the new bleachers, and planting of the vines (1937), at Wrigley Field. It was a fascinating process, and literally thousands of negatives were produced. Sometimes, it's really hard to keep track of all this."*





*Mr. & Mrs. Babe Ruth: "Dad always referred to Claire as Babe Ruth's second wife, for clarity or whatever reason. This was taken at Comiskey, and reminds me that she traveled with the Yankees on road trips at times. He was an amazing player and personality."*

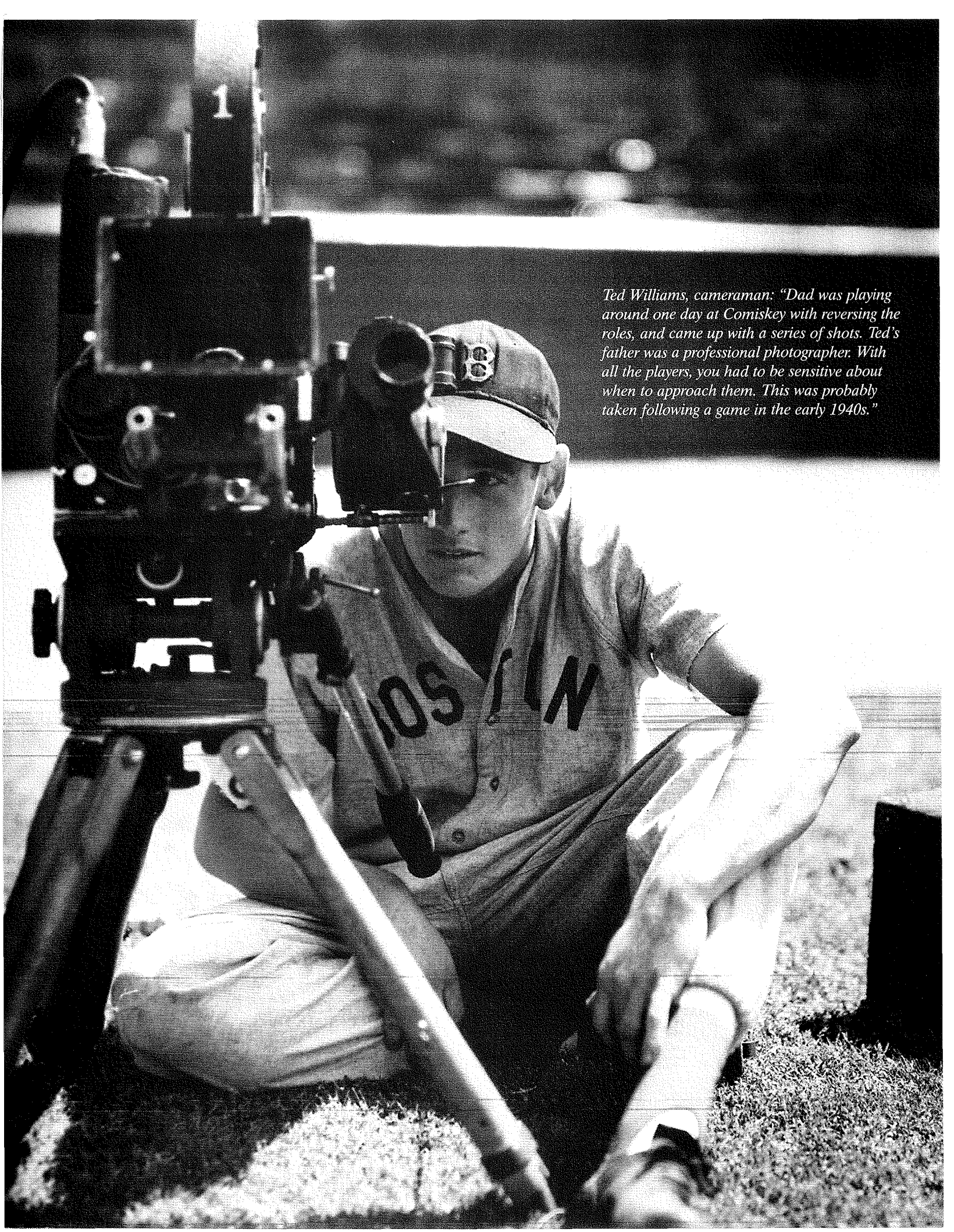


*Billy Herman & son: "He loved to take pictures with a family sense at the ballpark—players with children, brothers, fathers and sons, and so on. In his career, Dad went from the Waners to the Ripkens! He'd dress kids up (like Billy Jr. here) in little uniforms with equipment . . . isn't this a beautiful picture?"*

*Ted Lyons Day: "Because I've worked with these photographs since I was a kid, a lot of these old players are just recognized as friends. But Dad had greater personal contact and love for the game—and he really respected Ted Lyons. I started out drying pictures, then printing the black-and-whites. I'm still finding shots in the files I wish I could ask him about."*







*Ted Williams, cameraman: "Dad was playing around one day at Comiskey with reversing the roles, and came up with a series of shots. Ted's father was a professional photographer. With all the players, you had to be sensitive about when to approach them. This was probably taken following a game in the early 1940s."*