

  
**THE  
ORAL HISTORY  
RECORD**  
**SABR'S ORAL HISTORY COMMITTEE NEWSLETTER**  
**SPRING 2018**

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## THE CHAIRMAN'S COLUMN

by John McMurray

The release by SABR this month of an extraordinary range of interviews is one of the biggest steps forward for the Oral History Committee in many years. This collection is made up of more than 500 digitized interviews, conducted from the 1960s to the present. This effort, spearheaded by Jacob Pomrenke at SABR, can be viewed and searched at [oralhistory.sabr.org](http://oralhistory.sabr.org).

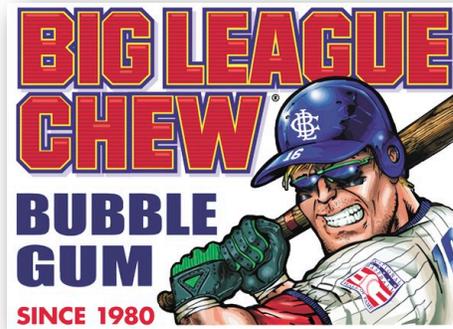
It is a wonderfully broad collection. Interviews with baseball figures from Buck O'Neil and Elden Auker to SABR convention player panels, and even a conversation with the wife of Mickey Cochrane are included here. Most interviews are about one hour in length, and though the audio quality can vary, listeners will have no trouble discerning the words of many players from long ago. The interviews that former major-league commissioner Fay Vincent recorded for his books of baseball oral history are also a part of this compilation.

It is also possible to search the collection by category. If researchers are looking for interviews of umpires, scouts, official scorers, players from the Negro Leagues, interviews in Spanish, or of Hall of Famers, they can easily be sorted. In cases where interview transcripts are available, they will be posted alongside the respective interview.

Though the earliest interview recorded in the Oral History Collection is from 1967, it should be emphasized that many players who played in the

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## REFLECTIONS ON THE ORAL HISTORY OF



by Anna McDonald

In 2015, I had a conversation with Rob Neyer, who was working at FOX Sports at the time, about an Oral History topic that he had always had in the back of his mind. Rob was friends with the founders of the iconic brand of bubble gum, Big League Chew, and was never able to write a story about it because of his personal relationship with the owners. Thankfully, Rob trusted me with his idea and allowed me to take it on as an Oral History project. The story of Big League Chew worked, and worked big, it received a lot of attention nationwide and landed on Pulitzer Prize-winning Don Van Natta, Jr.'s "Longform" website. But both the odd and most important things about this oral history were that it never would have worked so well without all the details of forgotten baseball history.

Had the idea for shredded bubble gum in a pouch merely been conjured up by two ballplayers in any Triple-A bullpen somewhere in the middle of the country, the story wouldn't be anything people would have wanted to read about. But Big League Chew had a link to this

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## THE ORAL HISTORY RECORD

SABR'S ORAL HISTORY COMMITTEE NEWSLETTER

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## INTERVIEWS WITH PLAYERS IN THE LATIN AMERICAN WINTER LEAGUES

by Lou Hernández

The “golden era” of baseball is as elevated and as ennobled in Latin America as anywhere in North America. Therefore, compiling an oral history of players who lived that *época dorada*, playing in the spirited 1950s Pan American winter leagues of Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Venezuela, Cuba, the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico was particularly satisfying for me, a lifelong baseball fan.

In 2011, I contacted approximately 140 surviving players from the era through mass mailings, requesting their participation in what became my second published book, “Memories of Winter Ball.” I managed to speak to a total of 51 players over a period of ten months.

The taped interviews—the majority of which were conducted over the phone—followed the same blueprint. I culled background and family information from each interviewee. Especially interesting was learning what ballplayers these future pros admired while they were growing up. From the signing of their first professional contracts, I led these mostly Depression-era babies as young men to their rendezvous in the Latin American Winter leagues. Once there, I asked the former athletes a similar array of questions, ranging from residency, marital status, diet, entertainment, recreations, stadiums and fans. I was also curious to hear each man’s opinion on good players and pitchers they saw or knew. I tried to jog the players’ memories on certain teammates and opposing players. When I clicked with a player in this regard, it was quite fulfilling to hear a chuckle, signaling an interesting anecdote was about to come forth.

I was often amazed at the recall of these aged men. The late Monte Irvin spoke about his time in Mexico—seventy years ago at the time—with remarkable clarity. The recently turned 90-year-

*continued on page 11*

# DUELING ORAL HISTORIES

by C. Paul Rogers III

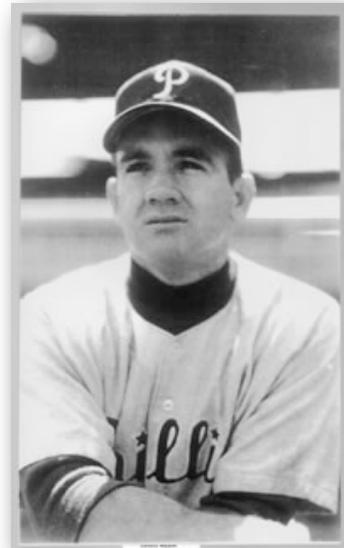
One interesting aspect of oral history is discovering how differently two people can perceive the same event. With our inherent fallibility as humans, just because we see something does not mean that we see it accurately, or, for that matter, remember it accurately. Criminal defense lawyers and prosecutors alike are well aware of the unreliability of eyewitness testimony. Simply put, our minds can play tricks on us and that, coupled with the frailty of our memories, can and do present obstacles for oral historians.

I encountered this conundrum when conducting interviews of the Whiz Kids, members of the 1950 Philadelphia Phillies, for my 1996 book with Robin Roberts titled "The Whiz Kids and the 1950 Pennant," published by Temple University Press. Although I wrote the book through Robin's eyes with him as the narrator, we both thought it would bring additional insight and depth to the book if I interviewed as many of his former teammates as possible. That I did, and as I put the book together, I interspersed his narrative with quotes I'd gathered from his teammates.

Robin, who had great recall, was genuinely interested in the insights of his teammates and we were both surprised to learn how greatly perceptions and memories of the Whiz Kids differed. A good example concerned Bubba Church's eye injury. On September 15, 1950, Ted Kluszewski smashed a line drive back at Bubba on the mound that caught him almost flush in the face, spinning him completely around as the ball ended up in right field where Del Ennis fielded it. The blow opened a large gash from Church's nose all the way under his left eye as blood poured out. It is perhaps important to say now that Bubba told me that he turned out not to be seriously injured.<sup>1</sup> He was taken to the hospital, but had no broken facial bones and his eye turned out to have no permanent impairment. A plastic surgeon did repair work

on the cut a few days later after the swelling went down.<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, it was a very scary injury.

Eddie Sawyer, the Phillies manager, told me about 43 years later that he was one of the first to reach the mound and that the ball had hit in the socket of Church's eye, causing his eyeball to hang out of the socket. Although this was decidedly not the case, other teammates had the same graphic account of Bubba's injury. As it was, Sawyer was renowned for his photographic memory and recall. For example, he taught and coached at Ithaca College, his alma mater, for several years during World War II and it was said that he knew the names and hometowns of all of the college's 1,500 students.



**Bubba Church**

It is probable that much of the disinformation about Bubba's injury was simply passed on verbally from teammate to teammate and taken as the gospel by those not in close proximity to the mound. After all, as photos showed, Church was a bloody mess. And of course, those claiming to have rushed to the mound may in fact not have done so as one's recall about startling events can certainly change over time.

I also learned how competing teams may have very different perceptions about the same game situation. For example, in the last regular season game in 1950, the Phillies played the Brooklyn

Dodgers in Ebbets Field with the pennant on the line. The Phillies were a game ahead but a Dodgers win would have sent the teams into a best of three playoff, not a desirable outcome for the pitching-depleted Whiz Kids.<sup>3</sup> In the bottom of the ninth inning of a 1-1 game, Richie Ashburn made the most famous throw in Phillies history to nail Cal Abrams at the plate by about fifteen feet. Abrams had been on second base with no one out and a runner also on first when Duke Snider lined a first pitch single to center field off Phillies starter Robin Roberts. Ashburn fielded the ball on one hop and threw to Phillies' catcher Stan Lopata who put the tag on Abrams several feet up the third base line.

It was a much-dissected play that probably caused Dodgers third base coach Milt Stock his job since it was he who waved Abrams home even though none were out. The Dodgers, now with runners on second and third with only one out, still had ample opportunity to win the game, but Roberts, after intentionally walking Jackie Robinson, retired Carl Furillo on a pop up to Eddie Waitkus at first base and got Gil Hodges on a fly ball to Del Ennis in right.<sup>4</sup> In the top of the tenth inning, Dick Sisler slammed a dramatic three-run home run off Don Newcombe to put the Phillies ahead 4-1. Roberts then secured the pennant for the Whiz Kids by retiring the Dodgers in order in the bottom half of the inning.

As related in "Bums," Peter Golenbock's excellent 1984 oral history of the Dodgers, Abrams believed that Ashburn was running toward the infield on Snider's hit to centerfield because the Phillies had a pickoff play at second on and Ashburn was backing up the play in case of an errant throw. According to Abrams, Roberts missed the pick off sign and threw home instead, but the pick off was why Ashburn was in a position to throw him out at the plate.

But, according to Roberts and Lopata, there was no pick off play. Roberts, who didn't like to throw to bases and didn't have a strong move, told me the Phillies didn't even have a pick off play to second, at least when he was on the mound. Ashburn agreed, telling me the pick off story was

"preposterous" because Roberts didn't even have a pick off play at first, much less second.

Instead, Roberts thought that Snider would surely be bunting and so laid a fastball in there, focusing on getting over to cover the third base line for a potential force at third. Some of the Dodgers, such as Carl Erskine, also thought Snider would be bunting and thought that was why Ashburn was playing so short in center. For his part, Ashburn thought that there was no way Snider was going to be bunting in that situation and labeled as ridiculous any notion that he was playing shallow for a bunt because, if there was a bunt, with runners on first and second the play would be at third or first. He did say that he came in a step or two from his normal position in center, but was afraid to come in too much because Snider had so much power.

Ashburn was a little defensive about his so-called weak throwing arm. He characterized his arm as not bad but not great but said he had worked hard to make sure his arm was accurate. He remembered that Snider's line drive reached him on one hop and was a perfect ball to catch and throw to the plate, just as he "had practiced a thousand times."



**Richie Ashburn**  
***Was there a pickoff play on?***

It is certainly not surprising that individuals, whether on the same team or not, assess and process key events differently. Sometimes,

however, one person simply confirms another's account of an event, which certainly helps to assure its authenticity. When I was working on Eddie Robinson's memoirs, published in 2011 as "Lucky Me--My Sixty-Five Years in Baseball," Eddie told me about playing in Baltimore Stadium when he played for the Baltimore Orioles in the International League in 1946. Baltimore Stadium was a football stadium with a very short left field porch and no fence at all in right, only the distant stands, an early day LA Coliseum. Eddie was a dead pull left-handed hitter and so had to leg out any hit to right all-season long.

Dr. Bobby Brown played for the Newark Bears in 1946 and confirmed Eddie's account of playing in the old Baltimore Stadium. He also remembered that Eddie had hit a gigantic shot to right field that year that carried way over the head of the Bears right fielder, Hal Douglas. The ball rolled all the way to the steps of the temporary clubhouse in deep, deep right field and by the time Douglas retrieved the ball, Robinson, who was anything but fleet afoot, had rounded the bases and was sitting in the Orioles dugout.<sup>5</sup> Eddie, not one to embellish his baseball accomplishments, confirmed the story.

So what is the moral of the story of dueling oral histories? To state the obvious, I suppose it is that it is always better to interview more than one ballplayer about signal events simply for accuracy's sake. Of course, that is often not possible but, oft-times, one can compare stories told with other available interviews, which is made much easier by the Oral History Committee's terrific new website. Dual interviews can together provide more accuracy, insight and depth. But, perhaps in the main, it is simply fun to compare the recollections of different ballplayers about important events in their careers and uncover their different takes on the same event.

<sup>1</sup> Church's first visitor in the hospital was teammate Bill Nicholson, who was in the same hospital getting treatment for diabetes. Nicholson had been listening to the game on the radio when Church was injured.

<sup>2</sup> Although Church was largely ineffective for the rest of the season, in 1951 he had his best year, winning 15 games for the Phillies.

<sup>3</sup> Three of the Phillies' starters were either injured or unavailable. Church had not pitched well after returning from his injury; Bob Miller was battling a bad back; and Curt Simmons was on active duty in Indiana after his National Guard unit had been activated due to the Korean Conflict.

<sup>4</sup> Although some writers labeled Hodges' fly ball to Ennis as a can of corn, Ennis had a very different story. He told me that he fought the late afternoon sun all the way and lost the ball as it came down. Fortunately for the Phillies, it hit him in the chest and he was able to hold on to it. In the clubhouse afterwards, Ennis had the stitch marks of the baseball imprinted on his chest.

<sup>5</sup> Dr. Brown and Eddie Robinson both had giant years in the International League in 1946, propelling them to the major leagues. They were in a three-horse race for the league MVP award with another famous ballplayer, Jackie Robinson. Eddie Robinson, who hit 34 home runs, drove in a league leading 123 runs and batted .318, won the award in a close vote.

*C. Paul Rogers III is Professor of Law and former Dean of the SMU Dedman School of Law. Co-author of several baseball books, including two with boyhood hero Robin Roberts, author of many biographies for the SABR bio project, and co-editor of both "The Whiz Kids Take the Pennant--The 1950 Phillies" and "The Team that Time Won't Forget--The 1951 New York Giants," both published by SABR. Paul is also president of the Ernie Banks-Bobby Bragan DFW Chapter of SABR since 1998.*

## RESOURCES FOR INTERVIEWERS

Available on the SABR Oral History Committee website at <http://sabr.org/research/oral-history-research-committee>

- A primer on how to conduct and submit oral history interviews
- A list of completed interviews by committee members (and transcripts, where available)
- A release form to be completed by all interviewers
- Audio of recently-completed SABR Oral History Committee interviews

# BABE'S PLACE

by Michael Wagner

In the thirteen plus years I spent researching, writing and self-publishing my 620-page book, "Babe's Place: The Lives of Yankee Stadium," the vast majority of this venture was very enjoyable. My favorite aspect of this volume was interviewing people, whether in person, by phone, e-mail or letters. Two hundred and twelve former baseball players, umpires and sportscasters responded in one way or another to my question about how they felt about the 1973-1976 renovation of Yankee Stadium, baseball's most sacred cathedral. Approximately twenty more people who had something to do with working on this project also responded.

The renovation of Yankee Stadium has normally received very little historical fanfare. Most books mention it in a paragraph or less and might have a photograph of this very historic event that added another 32 years of life to the "House That Ruth Built."

My feeling is that we are all living encyclopedias, whether we witness a major world event or just something to do with our family and friends. Once we are gone, so is the history, unless it's recorded. That was perhaps my greatest reason for writing my book. Instead of having my 230 Yankee Stadium renovation photos just sitting on a shelf, I wanted to fill in this historical void. By interviewing people who have played at or visited Yankee Stadium, I would be able to help preserve some of the thoughts and history witnessed by some of these breathing catalogues.

One of my favorite interviews was that of Dusty Rhodes, who played for the New York Giants from 1952-1957 and 1959. Dusty was a very honest and down to earth gentleman. Having grown up in West Hempstead, Long Island, New York, I grew up watching the "Bowery Boys" on TV. Leo Gorcey, who portrayed Slip Mahoney, the leader of the primarily 1940s and 1950s gang, was marvelous at mangling the English language. Thanks to Slip, my favorite word to this day is 'ain't.' And, just for fun, I have become quite

adept at mauling the English language myself. The things we learn as kids that carry on into adulthood. And to think I wrote a book!

I sent Dusty a letter in early January of 2008 and received a very nice response on January 14, in which he told me to call him if I wished to. You bet I did! The date was January 18, with my tape recorder at the ready. He told me to call him by his first name after calling him 'Mr. Rhodes.' Having said 'ain't,' and saying that he was taking "biotics" for his infected lung. I identified with Dusty very well.

When I mentioned the historic over the shoulder catch Willie Mays made off Vic Wertz in the 1954 World Series, Dusty said, "Oh, that was a routine catch. Hell, you should have seen some of the catches he made. Willie's the greatest player who ever lived, I guess." Dusty threw me for a loop when he told me, "It's a funny thing. When you get to the top, it really ain't fun no more. It really ain't. You tried, and tried, and tried, and then when you get there, it really ain't fun."

Between his language misappropriations, wonderful stories and his warmth as a human being, I felt right at home interviewing Dusty. He took up eight delightful pages in my book.

Bob Feller phoned me on October 25, 2004. What a nice shock and honor that was! Rapid Robert told me "baseball is built for merchandising." He also told me that he wrote three books and never made a nickel off any of them.

Fritz Peterson, who pitched for the Yankees from 1966 to 1974 wrote, "Mike, I felt honored to be the starting pitcher for the last game played in the house that Ruth built. The new place is fine, but it isn't the real thing (nor could ever be nor was ever meant to be). Even though my scouts promised I'd be in a series if I signed with the Yankees, I never was. However, playing for the "real" New York Yankees was worth more than being in any series could be. Baseball has changed; the world has changed; but the Yankees will always be the Yankees and it was an honor to be the smallest part of a big tradition! P.S.-- Good luck on your book."

Another favorite telephone interview was Doug Walker, a union carpenter who immigrated to the United States from Scotland in 1962. Doug served as a general foreman during the 1970s Yankee Stadium renovation. He spoke about the work he did and debris of the old Yankee Stadium as well as construction of the remodeled ballpark. He also worked on the World Trade Center construction. Aside from the great stories and information, I could listen to his Scottish brogue forever!

Another laborer at the site was Dick Muller, who worked as a “connector” during the Yankee Stadium 1970s modernization. He cut the 118 steel columns that held up the grandstand of the famed ballpark. Dick also helped erect the trusses and cables for the new grandstand. This man spent nineteen months on this project and is a wonderful historian who speaks beautifully. Dick also worked on the World Trade Center.

With every telephone interview, I asked if I could use a tape recorder for the interview for accuracy, then I would send them the typed interview for their approval, or any corrections they deemed necessary. Everyone agreed to this.

A friend told me that if someone didn't come across very well in an interview, it was their tough luck, as they've already answered my request. I immediately corrected him. My feeling was that if these people were kind enough to help me, the least I could do was to be accurate and honest with their words and feelings. Also, it was my responsibility as an author to ensure that I was precise with their words and reputations. I wanted to keep them in a positive light for their benevolence toward this then unknown writer.

Nearly every interviewee made corrections, additions or deletions to the manuscript I sent them. Once the book was published, their words would stand--good or bad. Of course, I wanted it to be good. In this day and age of sensationalism and “fake news,” I wasn't going to stoop to those low standards. By being fair, honest and objective, I could look at myself in the mirror and people in their eyes, and have nothing to hide because I did the best job I could, with honesty and precision being my steady foundations. By having such

interactions with my baseball heroes and other kind people, “Babe's Place” had the heart, soul, warmth, and important historical information that this baseball fan envisioned.



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## **BIG LEAGUE CHEW**    *continued from page 1*

hopeful, youthful, fairy tale love of baseball that's at the heart of what makes people love the game. The foundation of the Big League Chew story (because it was invented in the Portland Mavericks bullpen by Jim Bouton and Rob Nelson) started when Hollywood actor Bing Russell, who is the late father of actor Kurt Russell, brought an independent baseball team to Portland, Oregon in 1973. If scouting baseball players had any correlation to casting a movie, the 1975 Portland Mavericks were Bing Russell's Best Picture. The 1975 team, dying in terms of other possibilities to play professional baseball, was alive with the pure joy of the game. Russell was more interested in finding guys to play on the Portland Mavericks who truly loved baseball, than scouting guys who could actually *play* baseball. The world hadn't beaten the enthusiasm out of this bunch of scraggly baseball cast-offs nobody else wanted on their team. So the story of Big League Chew followed this same theme established by Bing Russell. Two dynamic guys -- Jim Bouton and Rob Nelson -- who just loved the game of baseball and were taught by Russell that anything was possible, brought to life an iconic

brand of bubble gum that became the biggest novelty gum manufacturing company in the world, earning them \$27 million in the first two years.

For the Oral History, I tracked down about 30 people involved in the story. It got off to a great start with extensive interviews with Bouton and Nelson. Before I started, I truly had no idea who would be good to interview for this story, but as they talked to me they named people who crossed their paths and impacted their lives. So those first two interviews led me to all the others.



***Rob Nelson, Jim Bouton  
and their conspicuously placed product***

My favorite interview by far, and honestly my favorite interview with anyone ever, was with Todd Field, the Academy Award-nominated writer and director who was the Mavericks' batboy and, to this day, Nelson's friend. I could have kept talking to him for days, even weeks. I both laughed and cried over the course of the interview. Todd has an extremely gifted and genius ability to recall and communicate details in a funny, thoughtful and insightful way. On recalling what Nelson was like he told me, "The sum total of what he owned consisted of three pairs of blue jeans, three work shirts and dozens of black, blue, red, and green flare-tip pens and a trove of graphic-ruled bound notebooks. All of this he stored in empty, industrial-size plastic pickle buckets that he'd catch from the obliging counter girl at the McDonald's on Burnside." As you see from the above quote, Field described

things so well it was almost like I was walking into McDonald's with them watching Nelson try to get a pickle bucket from the girl at the counter. Details like these are the key to writing an interesting Oral History.

But not only did Field describe everything with details in a way where it was like we were watching a movie of the Big League Chew story unfold, he also truly loves the game of baseball, understands what it can add to our lives, and was able to put into words how his experience with the Portland Mavericks and Rob Nelson made him who he is today.

So as the words on the page from those I interviewed began to take shape, the Oral History ended up being far more than an historical account of some chewing gum. Everyone involved in the story of Big League Chew went on to do these amazing things in their lives, and it all started from Hollywood actor, Bing Russell, who not only loved the game of baseball but broke tradition and put together a team in a way where he didn't judge people based on outward appearances. "There's nothing cynical about it," said Field in our interview. "We buy nostalgia and tradition. We don't buy jock-talk. We don't want that. Everybody is a narrative junkie. What's their story?"

The story of Big League Chew? Shredded bubble gum in a pouch ended up being an "American Dream" sports story. As Field said, being around Bing Russell and the Mavericks totally changed how he saw the world and what he wanted out of life: "I thought, they are a lot happier than anyone I've ever met before. They are truly enjoying themselves in a way that I've never experienced around grown men. So that's probably a better choice – doing the thing that you really are excited about yes, it may be risky – but it's probably the only thing that's ever going to make you feel really alive."

*For the past seven years, Anna McDonald has been writing for ESPN, covering Major League Baseball and the National Football League. Her work has also appeared in The New York Times, USA Today, FOX Sports and The Hardball Times.*

# IT AIN'T OVER 'TIL IT'S OVER

by David Paulson

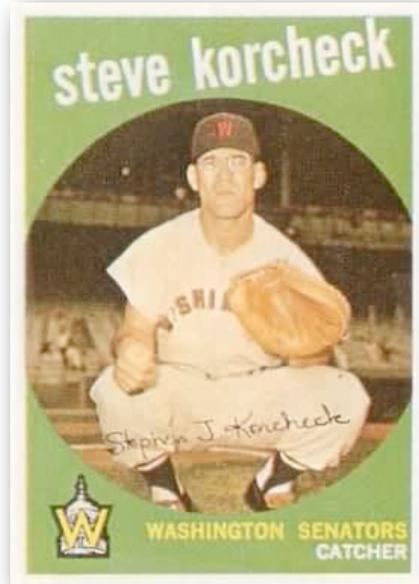
At the 1998 SABR National Convention in San Francisco, there were various committee meetings taking place. I saw a room marked "Oral History" and went in. Chairman Rick Bradley was conducting the meeting and it became apparent that the purpose of the committee was to interview ballplayers to get their stories and experiences. This excited me--getting to meet and talk with major league ballplayers. I talked with Rick after the meeting and he gave me some suggestions and literature on how to go about the interview. Since then I have conducted 85 interviews and one never knows what will be revealed, until the end.

My very first interview was with Jack Merson on September 18, 1998. He lived in Elkridge, Maryland, about 20 minutes away from my home. He had a short, three-year major league career starting in 1951. After we finished, he invited me into his study. Lined up on a shelf was a series of baseballs with autographs. Merson said each year he was in the minors and majors he would get teammates and opponents to autograph a baseball. He had compiled many players who turned out to be stars, including a few Hall of Famers.

Now we go to February 20, 2008, in Sarasota, Florida, where Don Carman had retired. At the end of the interview, I asked Carman what he did after baseball. He replied he went back to college, got a Masters in Psychology and went to work for Scott Boras! If a player was in a slump and had a personal problem, Boras would contact Carman (an ex-player) who by phone or in person would work with the player to try and resolve the issue. No wonder Boras is so successful as an agent.

Nine days later, I met with Steve Korcheck, also in Sarasota. By chance, I had sat behind Korcheck at our college graduation (George Washington University) but only knew him as a third team All-American linebacker. He was selected by the San Francisco 49ers in the third round, but chose an offer from the Washington

Senators where he caught for a few years. I asked him what he did after he retired and he noted that he became assistant baseball coach at Manatee Community College in Sarasota and earned a Masters degree. A few years later, he was appointed president of the college! In his fifteen years in that position, enrollment grew from 800 to 5,000.

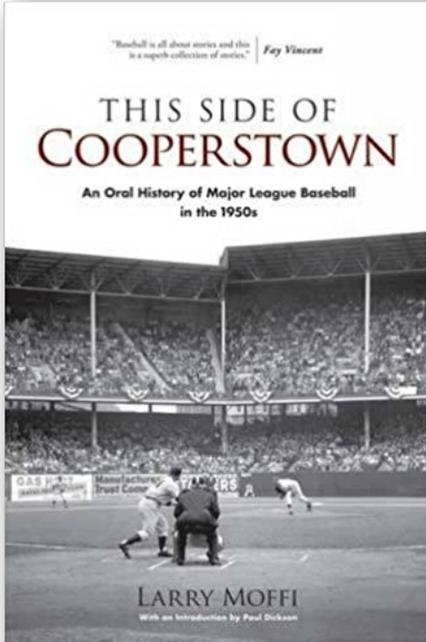


Later that year, on August 28, I interviewed Nicole Sherry at Camden Yards, home of the Baltimore Orioles. Sherry was the second woman hired as head groundskeeper by a major league team. After the interview in her office she asked me if I wanted to go with her onto the field, since the team was on the road. You betcha! As we approached the bullpen area, I noticed a few baseballs on the ground and Nicole said I could have one. In the bullpens, I noticed bathrooms, which made sense, but I never would have thought about that watching a game.

And on September 7, 2009, I interviewed Dallas Green at his beautiful farm in Pennsylvania. After the interview, Green took me out to his garage. I have never seen a cleaner, more immaculate garage! In it he had framed articles hanging from the walls, various awards on shelves, and lots of memorabilia scattered throughout. He told me no one went into the garage without his permission.

So there you have it folks. "It Ain't Over 'til it's Over."

## A THREE-BAGGER OF BOOK REVIEWS



### **THIS SIDE OF COOPERSTOWN AN ORAL HISTORY OF MAJOR LEAGUE BASEBALL IN THE 1950S**

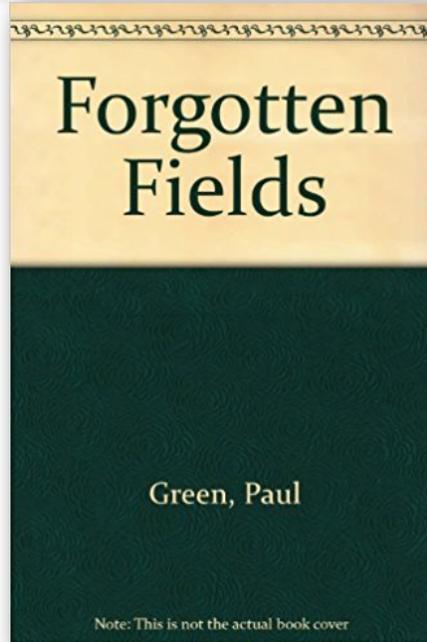
**BY LARRY MOFFI**

2010. Mineola, NY  
Dover Publications.  
[ISBN 978-0486472737.  
228 pp. \$12.95 Paperback]

Reviewed by  
**Ben Klein**

Tito Francona, the journeyman outfielder who posted a .359 average in 1959, is the seventeenth and final player featured in Larry Moffi's "This Side of Cooperstown," first published in 1996. Over a dozen or so pages, the book presents a panorama of Francona's baseball life, recalling his signing, reliving his time in the minors,

*continued on page 12*



### **FORGOTTEN FIELDS**

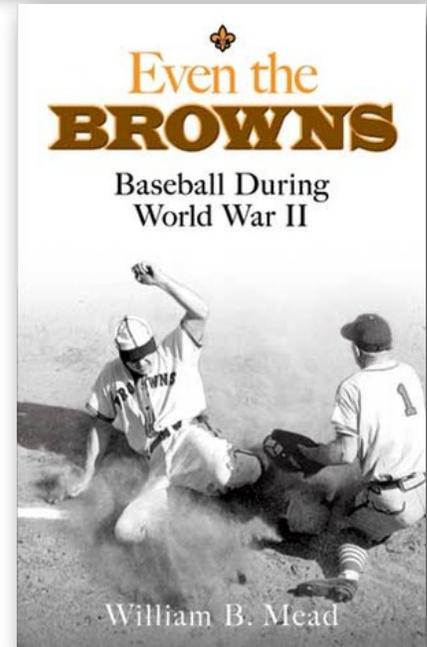
**BY PAUL GREEN**

1984. Bernardsville, NJ  
Parker Publications  
[ISBN 978-9996805981.  
238 pp. \$24.00 Paperback]

Reviewed by  
**Tom Willman**

In the early and mid-1980s, Paul M. Green was a familiar name to readers of Sports Collectors Digest. That publication had established itself as a resource and price guide for those who were driving the hobby's commercial renaissance, and Green was on point, writing about baseball cards. (He was also writing for COINS

*continued on page 13*



### **EVEN THE BROWNS BASEBALL DURING WORLD WAR II**

**BY WILLIAM B. MEAD**

2010. Mineola, NY  
Dover Publications  
[ISBN 978-0486474625.  
272 pp. \$12.95 Paperback]

Reviewed by  
**Sarah Johnson**

Before I reached the preface of William Mead's "Even the Browns: Baseball During World War II," the acknowledgments underscored the importance of recording stories--the author lists dozens of in-person and telephone interviews he conducted and mentions several interviewees who had passed away between the time he spoke with them from

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## WINTER LEAGUES *continued from page 3*

old Charlie Gorin could name the hotels and casino and San Juan neighborhood he lived in more than half a century earlier without hesitation. It was a vastly enjoyable period in their lives, which, no doubt, has kept pleasant and proud memories from completely fading. But, in listening to these men, I also surmised that one big reason for the sustaining recollections was the genuine love for the game that all the players clearly possessed.

I could not help but think about the treatment afforded to the North American players by their interim foreign owners. In addition to receiving higher salaries than their native competitors, all living expenses were paid for the visiting players and their wives and families, if the players chose to bring them. The living conditions and amenities provided to many players, especially in Havana and San Juan, were high-end vacation grade. What a shameful contrast to the inhospitable reception Hispanic players received during the same period in the United States, especially dark-skinned Hispanics (Although black players from the U.S. might not have received the same upscale accommodations as their Caucasian counterparts, those black players' living conditions and general treatment were levels above what they encountered at home.).

I traveled to Puerto Rico during the creative process of this work to attend a ceremony honoring Nino Escalera. The homage paid to Escalera was conducted by the Puerto Rican chapter of SABR. The two-hour event was held at Sixto Escobar Stadium, the historic home of the Puerto Rican Winter League for nearly a quarter century. Located in an idyllic setting—a short walk from the ocean—I tried to imagine the now-obsolete Estadio Sixto Escobar in its heyday as I strolled around it and peeked through the gated apertures along its concrete perimeter.

Right across from the ballpark is the old Normandie Hotel. Once a famous vacation stop for the affluent traveler from all over Latin America and the United States, the unique seven-story structure, architecturally designed in

the shape of the ocean liner of the same name, stands abandoned with broken windows dotting its exterior. It was the hotel where the New York Yankees stayed during their Spring Training jaunt to Puerto Rico in 1947 and the hotel that catered to the visiting national teams that participated in three Caribbean Series at Escobar Stadium in the 1950s.

I met several former players at the Escalera function, including the guest of honor. I was later able to speak to Nino as well as standout hurlers José “Pantalones” Santiago and Julio Navarro, recently deceased. They all proved to be great gentlemen, in particular the 89-year-old Santiago, with whom I continue to have recurrent phone contact.

Perhaps the highlight of the trip was a visit to the home of old Brooklyn Dodger Luis Olmo. As a member of that team in 1949, Olmo socked the first home run by a Hispanic player in the World Series, the blow coming against top reliever Joe Page. Olmo passed away at age 97 in 2017.

I closed each conversation with each player with a request for an autograph on a souvenir baseball. All the players said they would be happy to accommodate me. It took three balls for me to obtain everyone's signature and sent the balls to each player I did not meet personally, and was thrilled upon their return each time.



***Iconic Puerto Rican star Luis Olmo (l) and the author at the SABR Puerto Rican Chapter meeting in July 2011***

highlighting his stellar 1959 campaign, and addressing the frustrations he felt in the twilight of his career. A similar formula is repeated for the other sixteen subjects of the book that seeks to provide a window into baseball in the 1950s from the perspective of players who, although not superstars, enjoyed long and respected careers in the majors.

In following this formula, the book certainly owes a great debt to Lawrence Ritter's "The Glory of Their Times" and other standards of the oral history genre, but the book seeks to be distinguishable by exclusively celebrating players that have not been enshrined in the Hall of Fame. Although celebrating some of baseball's lesser-known figures is certainly a laudable undertaking, the novelty of this approach may be somewhat overstated as far from all of the subjects of "The Glory of Their Times" are enshrined in the Hall of Fame, and some of the players featured in "This Side of Cooperstown," such as Vic Power and Virgil Trucks, had stellar careers and credible Cooperstown credentials.

The focus on players who have fallen short of the Hall of Fame is one of the overt themes of the book, but another is painting a landscape of 1950s baseball through oral histories told by players who played in the era. The book successfully provides a unique perspective on some of the forces that shaped baseball in the 1950s. For example, Carl Erskine and Cal McLish fondly elaborate on the role that the Dodgers played in the Brooklyn community prior to their departure to Los Angeles. Conversely, Del Crandall positively contrasted the reception of the Braves in Milwaukee to the second-class status they endured in Boston. Vic Power recounts facing segregation in the United States, contrasting it with the more harmonious race relations he grew up with in his native Puerto Rico. And some of the subjects offer familiar but charming anecdotes involving the greatest stars of the era. Joe DiMaggio, for example, inspired detached awe from teammates and opponents

alike, as conveyed by Gene Woodling and Dave Philley, respectively. Ted Williams, in contrast, comes across more warmly when Vic Power recounts a sentimental airport encounter with him years after their playing careers had come to a close, and when Tito Francona recalls Williams introducing himself to him on the field before Francona's Major League debut.

The book, with its profiles of players who played before free agency, illustrates the unfairness that players faced on the business side of the game. Carl Erskine details how the reserve clause put players in a weak bargaining position, and three other subjects of the book--Frank Thomas, Dave Philley, and Roy Sievers--recount specific episodes of difficult negotiations with three of baseball's legendary executives--Branch Rickey, Connie Mack, and Calvin Griffith.

In addition to dealing with the business side of the game, the book provides interesting insights when delving into its technical aspects. Philley recounts how having Bobby Shantz on the mound brought out Philley's best defense. The book conveys the importance of the first pitch of an at bat, both from the perspective of pitcher McLish, who riffs on the value of being able to throw a first-pitch curveball for a strike, and from the perspective of hitter Bob Cerv, who attributes his success as a pinch hitter to being able to anticipate and put into play first-pitch fastballs. And shortstop Alex Grammas surveys the playability of the infields of some of the great bygone parks of the era, such as the Polo Grounds and Crosley Field.

The book is essentially organized in chronological order, starting with Marty Marion, whose playing career ended at the dawn of the decade, and ending with Francona, who, as the baby of the book, made his debut in 1956 and recently passed away on February 13. Happily, other subjects of the book (Frank Thomas and Vern Law as well as Erskine, Crandall and Grammas) are still alive, but Francona's passing gives "This Side of Cooperstown" renewed relevance and serves as a valuable portal to the players who graced baseball's greatest golden age.

magazine, Numismatic News, Baseball Cards magazine, and authoring paperbacks with titles like “Blacklist Cards: A Confidential List of Trading Cards to Unload.”) But Green had an affinity for vintage cards, and it was born of a passion for baseball history. So it was no stretch for him to segue into oral history. With the encouragement of his SCD editors, he began searching out old ballplayers to interview. Soon enough, that produced fresh encouragement for Green to pull his SCD interviews together in book form. The result is “Forgotten Fields,” a collection of 22 interviews published in 1984.

Today, the best way to find this paperbound volume from an obscure Wisconsin publisher is to haunt your public library, favorite old bookshop or online source (lately spotted on Amazon, Alibris, AbeBooks and [Biblio.com](http://Biblio.com)). But it's worth the search. If you enjoy reading about baseball as the players of distant days remember it, this merits a place on your reading list.

The book has a self-published look; it has no table of contents, and no index. Still, you'll find it among citations for a variety of SABR projects, and Green did several important things here. He captured some very clear reminiscences that were nearly beyond reach (nine of his subjects would be dead within two years of publication). And he went about his work with the kind of patience that encourages thoughtful, deeper reflection: He sat on a rural Pennsylvania porch one long afternoon with Smoky Joe Wood, looking at scrapbooks and coaxing memories of 1912, when the young pitcher won 34 games for the Red Sox and then three more in the World Series. He spent “a lazy day” talking with Hall of Fame pitcher Ted Lyons. He invested the time with Bill Wambsganss to affirm a three-dimensional sketch of a player whose 13-year career is often reduced to the frozen moment it took him to turn an unassisted triple play in the 1920 World Series. Green also included two former Negro League stars in his collection, Hall of Famer Buck Leonard and the less heralded Bill Byrd. Byrd was the rarer catch; Green's interview

is the first entry for this old spitballer on SABR's Baseball Index.

Like everyone else who has been moved to pursue living baseball memory, Green owes a debt to Lawrence S. Ritter and Donald Honig. Ritter's classic, “The Glory of Their Times,” was first published in 1966. Honig effectively produced the sequel in 1975--“Baseball When the Grass Was Real”--when he couldn't persuade Ritter to do it. Green acknowledged their inspiration, and he revisited some of their subjects as well. Among Green's interviews, Joe Wood, Bill Wambsganss and Edd Roush all had been done by Ritter; five others, including Ted Lyons and Charlie Gehringer, had been done in the Honig book.

Unsurprisingly, Green has a few recycled anecdotes. Yet, in each case, there's value added by Green's work--with facts, or a different interview direction, or tone. Green's interview with Ted Lyons, the Hall of Famer who pitched 21 years for the White Sox, is a perfect example.

Both Ritter and Honig presented their great interviews in first-person: the ballplayer in his own words. The format is traditional (“My Greatest Day in Baseball”, the ghosted columns by Christy Walsh, etc.). It also enables narrative control (and Honig, a successful novelist, brought notable tools to the work). But the post-interview effort is notoriously difficult. Appropriate editing and fidelity to the material and to the voice, create a rolling challenge. Green, by contrast, presented his interviews in straight Q-and-A (and without editing, the author says). Each player's chapter opens with a brief introduction and, except for the Negro Leaguers, biographical highlights in a box. Chronological flow is frequently absent--general questions, for instance, taking things in unpredictable directions--and you can feel the effort behind some interviews. Riggs Stephenson was a man of a lot fewer words than Waite Hoyt, who became the great raconteur of the Cincinnati broadcast booth after his Hall of Fame pitching career. But Green clearly gave his subjects time to get comfortable and room to muse, and that paid dividends. Donald Honig

and Paul Green both interviewed Ted Lyons, who was genial, witty and universally liked in the game. Nearly a decade apart, both sessions yielded rewarding pieces. Honig's interview produced a smooth biographical narrative. But it's Green's sampler that delivers the sense of a highly competitive old-school pitcher.

Lyons remembered hitting Yankee great Bill Dickey on the elbow after Dickey moved up in the box on his fastball and got a hit. He remembered a day in Detroit when star Charlie Gehringer came out first-pitch swinging and hit a homer. Next at-bat, Lyons hit him on the knee. Lyons also remembered throwing batting practice for Charles Comiskey's grandson, then a teenage school athlete. The youngster hit him on the leg with a line drive. "He just laid the bat down and said, 'That's all buddy.' I said, 'Hit another one.' He said, 'no,' because he knew I'd hit him in the ribs." Now, the young Comiskey grew up around the ballpark, and recalled that Lyons was like a father to him, so maybe Lyons was winking at his interviewer here. It would have been in character. And maybe he was winking again when he told Green how he admired Chicago's other pitching staff.

**Lyons:** I liked all those Cubs, Burleigh Grimes, Charlie Root, Pat Malone, Larry French--all the pitchers.

**Green:** A lot of people claim they were a nasty group with knocking people down.

**Lyons:** Right, the best pitching staff in the world.

But then there's this, clearly in a more serious vein. Lyons, who joined the White Sox in 1923, remembered seeing Ty Cobb racing home, not sliding but leaping spikes-first and cutting both of the catcher's arms. Yet in this same session Lyons spoke admiringly of how quickly Cobb's mind worked, how many ways he found to beat you.

**Lyons:** Sure he would; he'd use everything. He was the best at hitting the ball where he wanted to hit it. He was a kind of different man after he got out of baseball. He never did have many friends, but when he got out actively he had a good many friends. I don't think

you should hold being aggressive against a fellow, I think you ought to give him a big hand. A lot of them, you'd like to give a boot and tell them to get a little more aggressive.

**Green:** It's strange; I know Joe Wood really liked him.

**Lyons:** I did too.

Finally, this is worth noting as well. Green asked Lyons if he was partial to any modern players. Lyons' first thought: "Well, I admire that (Nolan) Ryan, he's a great pitcher and a great guy. He's been hurt about six times the last couple years and never complained at all... He's the best guy for strong character in a pitcher, and he gives it all he's got."

Ted Lyons won 260 games, despite losing perhaps three seasons to military service. He twice led his league in wins, complete games and innings pitched. He threw 356 complete games, including 20 when he went 14-6 at age 41. Nolan Ryan won 324 games in a 27-year career, losing time to military service. He is the game's career leader in strikeouts and no-hitters. And he threw 222 complete games, including five when he went 13-9 for Texas at age 43.

Ted Lyons' tip of the old-school cap--from a Hall of Fame pitcher who started in the 1920s to another who would pitch into the '90s--reminds why we value baseball oral history: For the values and ties that bind us across generations to the game.

*Tom Willman is the former Chairman of SABR's Oral History Committee.*

### Recently digitized interviews:

Elden Auker	Jim King
Jim Bouton	Bill Lohrman
Jerry Casale	Brandon McCarthy
William De Jesus	Wally Moses
Al Fenner	Mel Parnell
Edward Gill	German Rivera
Gail Harris	John Schuerholz
Billy Hunter	

## JOHNSON

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1975-1977 and the time the book was ultimately published in 1978.

In his book, Mead gives baseball fans a fun and insightful look into the world of the diamond game during the early to mid-1940s. In addition to his impressive array of interviews, he weaves in some personal history and utilizes a variety of primary sources including reports from *The Sporting News*, *The New York Times* and the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*.

The inclusion of sixteen black and white photographs also helps bring the era to life. In one of Sportsman's Park you can see advertisements for three beer companies which made me realize not much has changed in St. Louis throughout the years--I remember noticing during a recent trip to Busch Stadium that they had the largest beer selection of any ballpark I've visited. They do like their beer in St. Louis.

At first, the title and subtitle of the book may seem like they could be topics for two separate books (the St. Louis Browns winning their only pennant in 1944 and baseball during World War II), but Mead weaves them together adeptly to give appropriate context to those who may not be completely familiar with this era of baseball history. In the chapter titled, "Baseball Wins the War," he writes "Like a chameleon, baseball changed color to match the hue of public feeling toward the war. As the 1941 season opened with America still at peace, *The Sporting News* published cartoons contrasting the United States and Europe. The former showed a boy in the stands cheering as a runner slid into base. The latter pictured a lad beside a heap of rubble, grieving for his dead grandmother. "Europe's national pastime seems to be war; America's is baseball," the caption declared. By May of 1943, a cartoon in the same publication was urging fans to "run a Hun, bap a Jap, bop a Wop."

The wartime efforts of star and lesser known players are extensively documented but I found some of the other anecdotes particularly interesting--yes, I know Bob Feller served in World War II but I wasn't as familiar with how

the war impacted institutions we take for granted today. In chapter seven, "Hardships on the Home Front," Mead writes "In baseball, nothing is more traditional than spring training in Florida. In wartime, nothing would more conspicuously flout the national mood of self-sacrifice than the sight of professional athletes basking in the sun. In January of 1943, Judge Landis pulled the prickliest hair shirt of all onto every player lucky enough to escape the draft. He ordered the sixteen major league teams to conduct their spring training north of the Mason-Dixon Line."

The dearth of talent during this era was perhaps best summed up by Branch Rickey, who said in spring 1944, "All I can say is that we have a large number of human beings at the training camp." Mead does a good job of describing how much of a motley crew the St. Louis Browns were (most were either well past their prime or classified as unfit to serve in the military) but the one thing I would have liked him to cover more thoroughly was the atmosphere in St. Louis during the 1944 World Series. Played between the Cardinals and Browns, it was held exclusively at Sportsman's Park, which the two teams shared. Many New York baseball fans undoubtedly have fond memories of the 2000 Subway Series between the Mets and the Yankees and it would have been interesting to read more about that from another city's perspective in a different era--what was St. Louis like during this time?

This is a minor quibble though as the fourteen chapters in the 241-page book are well laid out and cover the era admirably. In addition to those interviewed, this book also provides a reminder that it's not only the interviewees who are important, it's imperative to have someone to record their stories--in researching this author, I came across the fact that he passed away earlier this year. Reading his book is a reminder that the work will endure.

### *Editor's note:*

*The prices and availability of these books are based on Amazon.com at the time of publishing of this newsletter.*

1930s through the 1960s are included, with the interviews having been recorded after their playing careers ended. Hank Bauer's interview was completed in 1991 while Larry Doby has two interviews in the collection, from 1994 and 2000. There is a Mickey Vernon interview from 1972, a Bing Devine interview from 1987 and a Phil Niekro interview from 2010, among many others. Many of these interviews were digitized through a collaboration with the National Baseball Hall of Fame Library.

SABR also possesses an additional 250 audio tapes of player interviews which, when digitized, will be added to the Oral History Collection. Since these tapes need to be transferred individually to a digital format, it will take some time before these tapes can be put one-by-one into an electronic format. But it will happen.

If you have oral history interviews of baseball figures in an MP3 format that you would like to contribute to the collection, please let me know. Modern-era player interviews are also particularly welcome. Not only can listeners hear the voices of players who they may only have heard about, but these interviews will also serve as a complement to SABR's BioProject, providing important details and color which will make SABR's biographical efforts stronger and more complete.

It is through SABR's long-term dedication to this initiative that we now have this range of interviews available. It is certainly one of the most elaborate baseball oral history collections ever compiled, and many these interviews can be found exclusively on this easy-to-navigate site. We invite you to make use of it and to let us know what you think.

**ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION**

## Welcome to the SABR Oral History Collection!

The SABR Oral History Collection includes hundreds of interviews conducted with ballplayers (Major Leagues, Minor Leagues, Negro Leagues, AAGBBL), executives, scouts, authors, writers, broadcasters, and other figures of historical baseball significance. These interviews, some of which date back more than 50 years, were conducted by members of SABR's Oral History Research Committee and were digitized through a collaboration with the National Baseball Hall of Fame Library.

[Click Here to Begin Browsing Through Our Collection](#)

### RANDOM INTERVIEWS

- Hugh "Red" Alexander
- Russ Gibson (1992)
- Don Kaiser (Unknown)
- Bill Fleming (1996)
- Allie "Red" Conkwright
- Jim "Mudcat" Grant

*The above is a screen capture. To visit the website, click the link below :*  
<http://oralhistory.sabr.org>