

## **JOHN THORN ON LARRY RITTER AND “THE GLORY OF THEIR TIMES”**

**By John McMurray**

Shortly after Lawrence S. Ritter published his enduring oral history of early-century ballplayers, Wilfrid Sheed in 1966 offered a glowing review in *The New York Times*:

“All in all, *The Glory of Their Times* seems to me quite simply the best sports book in recent memory. This is a field in which little truth is to be found, and less poetry. The average sports memoir is a prodigy of simpering modesty and high-minded platitude: enough to rot the mind and sap the morals of the sturdiest child. This one tells it right.”

Ritter’s success in creating the most important and enduring work of baseball oral history derived largely from his insistence on listening, particularly to allow his subjects to steer an interview in the direction they chose. Ritter’s interruptions were infrequent. Said David Margolick in *The New York Times*: “He treated them like people, not as relics.”

John Thorn, Official Historian of Major League Baseball, spoke to the Oral History Committee in Miami at SABR 46 on July 30, 2016 about knowing Ritter and working closely with him. One topic of particular interest was how Ritter purposefully chose the order of the spoken anecdotes when preparing the individual chapters.

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## **A COLLATERAL BENEFIT OF ORAL HISTORY: AN AFTERNOON WITH TED WILLIAMS**

**By C. Paul Rogers III**

In the late 1990’s I collaborated with Bill Werber for a book published in 2001 that we titled *Memories of a Ballplayer: Bill Werber and Baseball in the 1930s*. The project came about somewhat by accident and before it was done produced a once-in-a-lifetime experience for me, namely an afternoon with Ted Williams at his home in Hernando, Florida.

I had first contacted Werber a few years earlier when I was doing research for a book I co-authored with Robin Roberts on the 1950 Cinderella Philadelphia Phillies.<sup>1</sup> The “Whiz Kids,” as they were known, won the 1950 National League Pennant in a dramatic last game, extra inning victory over the Brooklyn Dodgers. I learned that Werber had been close friends and teammates with Dusty Cooke, one of the Whiz Kids coaches, so I wrote Bill asking him what he could tell me about Cooke, who died in 1987.<sup>2</sup>

I received a lengthy reply and quickly learned that Werber was an inveterate and outstanding letter writer, as befitting his Duke University education. We began a lengthy correspondence about his baseball career and those he had known and played with and against in the 1930s when he was one of the top leadoff men in baseball. I had read Bill’s self-published 1978

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## THE ORAL HISTORY RECORD

SABR'S ORAL HISTORY COMMITTEE NEWSLETTER

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## MCMURRAY *continued from page 1*

"[Other oral historians] have not done what Larry did, which was to take passages from the beginning and put them in the middle, passages from the middle and put them in the beginning, so that the order of things became an artful narrative," said Thorn. "One could argue that his practice of oral history was not true to the voice of the interviewee. I would say he enhanced the interviewee and made it sound more like himself."

Part of the rationale for Ritter's editing, Thorn said, was that "if you listen to the tapes, you get a sense of how rough things were. Chief Meyers was rambling all over the place. [Sam] Crawford too."

Thorn described his own editing of Ritter's interview with Marty McHale—one which was not included among the twenty-six in Ritter's book—where he cut the 80-page transcript into multiple pieces on the floor, using numbered headings to signal important content, in order to rearrange something "which was very rugged, very disjointed, not pleasing in its original form" and instead to make it into a piece that was "magically transformed into something that was linear, something that had a distinctive voice."

Thorn emphasized the importance of remaining true to what the interview subject actually said: "Because I never wrote anything for Marty McHale, as Larry Ritter never wrote a word for Chief Meyers," said Thorn. "All he did was rearrange things to give some emotional resonance to the story. I think this is permissible within the bounds of oral history. I don't think this is false to history or false to the interviewee."

Thorn offered this approach for linking components of interviews together to improve the flow of the narrative:

"I think it is not necessary for the magician to reveal the secrets of his trade, just to entertain the audience," said Thorn. "Now, if the writer decides that there is something that the interviewee didn't say that he really should have said so I'll just write it for him, that's bad. For that, you could insert brackets indicating a

change in voice and allow a reader to move gracefully between two otherwise disjointed passages.”

Ritter was, according to Thorn, “his own man,” someone who “was bullheaded” and “impervious to trends.” Thorn did not believe that Ritter’s methods would have changed even if he had undertaken the project two decades later.

For all of the praise Ritter has accumulated, he “could be a handful,” Thorn said. Thorn described how he and Mark Rucker were at Ritter’s apartment looking at images and text for their book in progress, *The Babe: A Life in Pictures*, when Ritter, in a fit of frustration, threw down his papers and insisted that Thorn or Rucker had to go. The mini storm soon passed and both stayed. But Thorn’s point is that Ritter’s “testy” side is part of the picture, too. “We don’t have to create a plaster saint for the dashboard,” said Thorn.



**John Thorn**

*Official Historian of Major League Baseball*

Particularly since the interviews in *The Glory of Their Times* were conducted in the 1960s, there are some anecdotes which are factually incorrect or imprecisely recounted. Ritter, as one questioner at the meeting noted, made a point of not interrupting a player and of correcting him whenever he made a misstatement, letting the player instead continue to speak, “which is the correct way to do things,” Thorn said. “And [Ritter] went beyond that to include in his printed interviews information he knew to be wrong because his dedication was to the voice of

the player, not to the fact that you could find in an encyclopedia that seemed trivial. I have heard at SABR meetings in past years that Ritter should be downgraded because he has so many factual errors. Excuse me, there are no factual errors in *The Glory of Their Times* because these are the words of the men with whom he spoke. Now, did he clean up things within the interview that were in direct conflict? Yes.”

Among other elite baseball books, Thorn listed Harold and Dorothy Seymour’s books on baseball; David Block’s *Baseball Before We Knew It*; Robert Smith’s *Baseball*; and Jules Tygiel’s *Baseball’s Great Experiment*. “These seemed to me, with *The Glory of Their Times*, the five greatest works of baseball history,” Thorn said. He added one caveat:

“Now, if you say what’s the best baseball book ever, I will throw in [Jim] Bouton’s *Ball Four*,” said Thorn. “It’s not a book of baseball history, but just as if you’re asked who is the greatest baseball player of all time, and your answer is someone other than Ruth, Mays, Williams or Bonds, then you don’t know baseball. If your answer to the greatest baseball book of all time is other than Bouton or Ritter, you may know something about baseball but your opinion is,” Thorn said with a broad smile, “inferior to mine.”

In a 2010 *Wall Street Journal* assessment of the five best baseball books ever published, Peter Morris lists *The Glory of Their Times* as his top choice. “Eagle-eyed observers have detected some errors in the recollections, but that scarcely matters,” said Morris. “Hundreds of baseball books get the minutiae right. None has ever captured the spirit of an era better than *The Glory of Their Times*.”

Fifty years after *The Glory of Their Times* was published, Thorn is firm in his belief that nothing about Ritter’s book needs to be tightened or improved. “No. No. No. And did I say, ‘no?’ *The Glory of Their Times* in perfect and anyone who wants to quibble and say ‘Well, he lets Sam Crawford run on too long in this passage,’ there’s the gestalt of the thing. Don’t go in there with a microscope. Go in there with eyes wide open and just let it wash over you.”

# I-70 WORLD SERIES

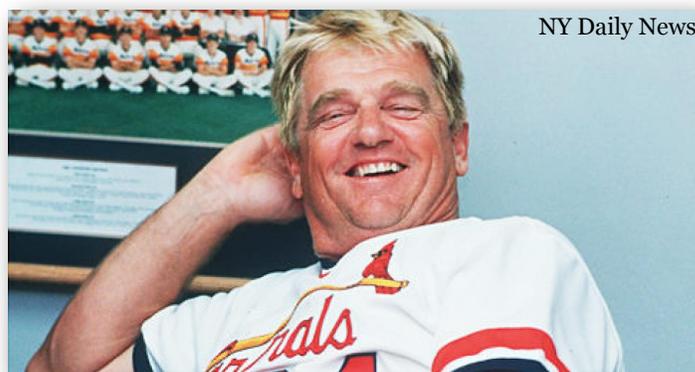
by Anna McDonald

For as much as the 1985 World Series was talked about by sports fans and non-sports fans alike over the course of thirty years, there was very little actual reporting on the great I-70 World Series. Through the years, writers would continue to do various levels of reporting on the blown call by Don Denkinger at first base in Game 6. But the series in its entirety, and the 1985 season for that matter, had what I felt was an intense whipsaw of emotion: those times when a simple sports story can swing your heart to pain, but then eventually move it to happiness, or at least peace. I desperately wanted to write a story that put the context of “The Call” into the craziness of *all* that happened over the course of the entire series. In 2015 I was lucky; Rob Neyer trusted my instincts with the idea, and then allowed me to let the story unfold. The greatest lesson I’ve learned about the beauty of Oral Histories is no matter what direction you envision the story going, be open-minded and let the reporting dictate the story. The entire goal, and thus attraction for readers, of an Oral History is the writer completely steps out of the way. The people involved simply tell their story. Traditional reporting pieces have the writers prose, maybe stats, and perhaps some color commentary on the scene. In a good Oral History, the money is in the details as told by the characters, not the writer.

The most difficult part of any Oral History is tracking down people for interviews. With the 1985 World Series, Whitey Herzog was, obviously, at the top of my list. I was fortunate enough it worked out for him to be my first interview. I knew if I had his thoughts first this would help the other interviews have more depth and detail. We arranged to meet at Busch Stadium before a game. When I arrived at the stadium my press pass wasn’t ready. Once that was sorted, which took a good bit of time on the receptionist’s part and a huge amount of stress on my part, she told me, “Well, you’re all set. Whitey is here in the stadium somewhere. Not

sure where he is at the moment. Good luck.” Thus began my reporting for the 1985 World Series, wandering around the dark tunnels in Busch Stadium hoping to find--in time for the interview--Hall of Fame manager Whitey Herzog, and not ending up swallowed up by a pallet of nacho chips that line the halls underneath all MLB stadiums.

Herzog was great, he was insightful, and one of those interviews where you ask the first question and thirty minutes later after laughing, almost crying, and learning about the wonderful game of baseball, you are thinking, *I’ve only asked one of my questions!* Finding people to talk for any Oral History is all about forced luck. On one hand, the interviews don’t happen without the hard work of building relationships and trust with people in the industry over the years, and then, on the other hand, it’s like fishing. Sometimes you have good luck and catch something and sometimes you don’t. No matter, you have to keep trying, keep casting that line. Over the years, there have been people who I was *sure* would say yes to an interview, but declined. Then, there are those who I knew would never agree to an interview, but, sure enough, they were willing to talk to me.



**Whitey Herzog**

*30 minutes of laughing, almost crying and learning and still only one question answered*

Another difficult aspect of an Oral History is how time-consuming preparing questions can be. The entire success of the Oral History depends upon the quality of questions I ask. So for each person I interview I have a different set of questions

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## NORMAN MACHT ON INTERVIEWING

A long time ago, I realized I could learn more about a player by talking to other players--teammates and opponents--than to the player himself. This is not important if you are visiting a player for the SABR Oral History Committee or to write an article about him, but, for a book-length project, I consider it essential.

For example, I never met Roberto Clemente, but you'd never know what a jokester he was from the newspapers. The writers never saw it. But Bill Virdon and other Pirates of his time told me, "You got him going on a plane or bus telling jokes and stories and he had everybody in stitches."

Greg Maddux didn't tell me that he yelled at himself on the mound when he made a mistake, but pitching coach Billy Connors did. Or that he was a fiercely competitive Super Nintendo player on planes or to relax before a start, as his Nintendo opponent and catcher Joe Girardi told me.

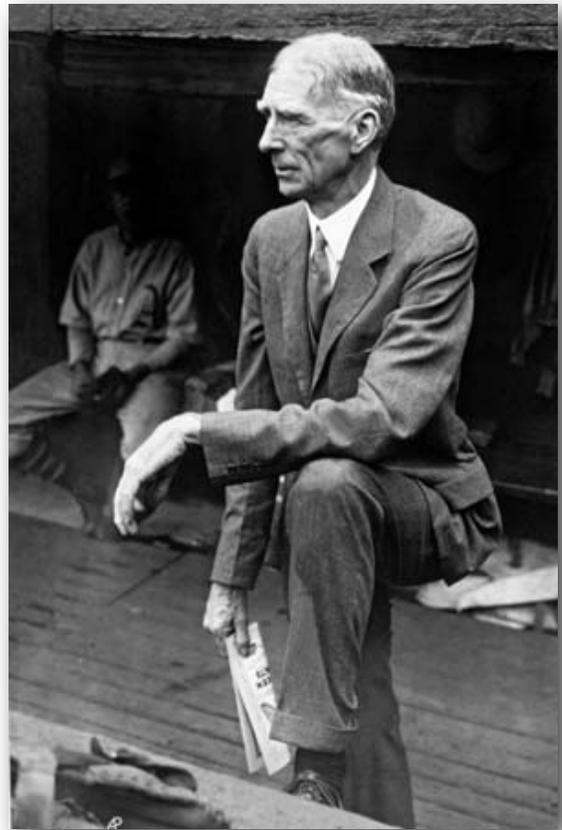
I didn't know Connie Mack, and refused to rely on what I had read about him. In addition to family and A's players and their wives, I sought out people who knew him or worked for him: sportswriters, club employees from front office to vendors, A's fans, proprietors of spring training hotels. When someone told me their father or grandfather had been a fan in the days of Grove and Simmons or in the '40s and '50s, I tried to talk to those who were still alive. I learned how he dealt with autograph seekers, how he dealt with strangers and players' wives, what policemen and bus drivers and employees and fans thought of him.

I tried to talk to every A's player, clubhouse employee and batboy I could find. When they learned that my subject was Connie Mack, they were eager to talk. Except one. Unable to reach Hank Majeski by phone, I went to his home, hoping that my presence would evoke an

invitation. It didn't. I got no farther than the driveway. I never learned what his problem was.

Only by talking to them could I learn how much Mr. Mack was loved and respected by everyone, including players who held out in contract squabbles. They, not I, painted the portrait of the man.

That's how I learned what Bob Dillinger, Mack's last big disappointing acquisition, was really like. And what their teammates really thought of Al Simmons, Lefty Grove, Mickey Cochrane and other stars. And their reactions when Mack fired his bullpen mainstay, Nelson Potter, probably costing him the 1948 pennant. And who was really running things in the dugout when Mack was declining mentally in his last five active years. And what happened on the bench when Chief Bender was relieved in Game One of the 1914 World Series (yes, I found that team's last survivor, Shag Thompson.)



**Connie Mack**  
*The "Tall Tactician" is Macht's most notable subject.*

In the days when the only Google around was Barney Google (you youngsters can Google him), I relied on the Smalling guides to players' addresses, club PR offices, team historical societies, referrals by players, and detective work. I made appointments when I could, but occasionally showed up unannounced. For example: unable to find an address or telephone number for Ferris Fain, I went to the small town in northern California near where he lived and asked around until I found someone in the post office who gave me directions to Fain's home surrounded by then-illegal marijuana fields. I didn't know how I would be greeted. It turned out to be among the most memorable and productive day of my travels with tape recorder. Despite my unexpected arrival and his physical problems--he couldn't walk--he welcomed me and was a great storyteller and host for the next six hours. He rates an MVP for his contribution to volume three of the Mack opus.

I avoided telephone interviews if possible. They have severe drawbacks, time constraints being one. Nobody likes to talk on the telephone for a few hours. Recording can be chancy or limited. There is less opportunity for digressions away from your prepared questions --a vital part of a fruitful interview, no chance to view photos or other memorabilia that might evoke stories. I settled for it only when a player's health considerations made him reluctant to see anyone.

Not all interviews are great. Some players don't remember much or go beyond "nice guy" or "great hitter." It doesn't mean you've failed as an interviewer. One man I visited turned out to be stone deaf. Another was on his deathbed (had been for weeks, said his daughter).

I transcribed my interviews only when I was going to write an article or use the information in a book.

The key to all successful interviews is preparation. You can't be too well prepared. (Joe Oeschger, who is known for only one thing in his career--pitching the longest complete game in

history, told me one interviewer's first question was, "What position did you play?" Said Oeschger, "That interview went downhill fast.") I had lists of questions, managers they had played for, teammates to ask about: "What were they like as people, not just players?" I lugged the Big Mac encyclopedia with me, in case a player couldn't recall a teammate's name or wanted to check his stats. But I also let them digress into unexpected areas, prompting follow-up questions that were not on my list. It also helped that I had seen many of them play and was familiar with the names they mentioned.

*An author of over 30 non-fiction books, Norman Macht is best known for his three-volume biography of Connie Mack. He lives in Escondido, California, with his wife, Sherie.*

## 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
- And, soon, audio of recently-completed SABR Oral History Committee interviews

**The interviews below were conducted since last summer and are available as MP3 files. To request any of them, please contact John McMurray at [saboralhistorycommittee@gmail.com](mailto:saboralhistorycommittee@gmail.com):**

Barry Bloom (MLB.com columnist)  
Chuck Dybdal (official scorer)  
Joe Moeller  
Dave Rozema  
Bob Rosenberg (official scorer)  
Ben Trittippoe (official scorer)

# AN ORAL HISTORY OF THE DOUG MIRABELLI TRADE

by Tim Healey

The Doug Mirabelli trade long seemed ripe to be Oral Historied. It was famous enough to be remembered, obscure enough for those involved to be forthcoming, and tight enough of an angle to be told in a manner that wouldn't become unwieldy. And, from a personal standpoint, I was a teenage Red Sox fan in May 2006, so I was also drawn to it in a "Wait, what really happened here?" sense.

I put the wheels in motion early--January 2016, when I knew the 10-year anniversary wasn't until May. Theo Epstein, a key interview to this then-theoretical piece, was going to be a difficult get. When he hosted a charity event in Boston that I was covering, however, I asked if he had a few minutes to talk about something else. When I said it was the Mirabelli trade, his hesitation gave way to a smile and a "Yeah, sure." That's when he told me he accidentally called Josh Beckett instead of Josh Bard to say he got traded, in addition to calling the trade the worst he's ever made.



**Doug Mirabelli**

*The .231 lifetime hitter was traded to the Red Sox twice, the first time in 2001.*

By March, I pitched a story of an oral history of the Mirabelli trade to Paul Swydan at *The Hardball Times*. By the end of the month, I started reaching out to others through their current or former teams or workplaces--Tim Wakefield, Josh Bard, then-Padres GM Kevin

Towers, the Massachusetts State Police in an attempt to get in touch with the cop who drove Mirabelli to the ballpark. Mirabelli himself was initially difficult to get hold of--and, I think, hesitant to talk about it--but after a bit of email back and forth and phone tag, we chatted for a half hour. That was by far the most crucial interview of the whole thing, of course, since he was at the center of it all, from the private plane ride to wearing Wily Mo Pena's cleats to leaving his athletic cup in the cop's car. It felt like Mirabelli warmed up the longer we talked. All of the interviews followed a similar process: The subjects taking me through May 1, 2006, from their perspective. All I had to do was thread them together. The story is available at <http://www.hardballtimes.com/the-doug-mirabelli-trade-an-oral-history/>.

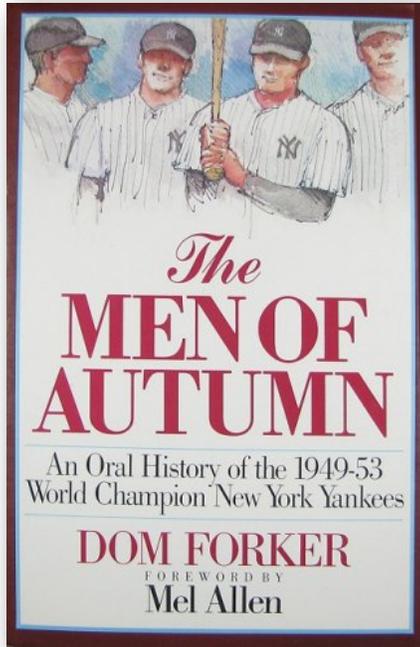
The biggest lesson from this piece is a journalistic one I am always happy to be reminded of: Always make the extra phone call. At Swydan's urging, I pushed late for Yankees GM Brian Cashman and Red Sox traveling secretary Jack McCormick. They both added great color. The MSP statement that admitted it was a bad look for the state troopers also came toward the end. I worked all three of those voices into the story in the final 24-36 hours.

The piece fell short in areas where I wanted to get in touch with more people. I wish I had pushed harder for reaction from Josh Beckett (who isn't big on giving interviews in his retirement) on being told he'd been traded. I also couldn't navigate the bureaucratic FAA on details about clearing airspace (for a ballplayer!), and I wish I had tried to track down the private jet company/pilot the Red Sox hired for that day.

The lesson there, too, then, is that you can always make the extra call. There are always more details to be dug up and more reporting to be done.

*Tim Healey is the Miami Marlins beat writer for the South Florida Sun Sentinel. Prior to moving to South Florida in the summer of 2016, he lived and worked in Boston, where he graduated from Boston University and covered high school, college and pro sports for a number of publications.*

## THREE ORAL HISTORIES THAT MAY HAVE BEEN FORGOTTEN ABOUT...



### THE MEN OF AUTUMN: AN ORAL HISTORY OF THE 1949-53 WORLD CHAMPION NEW YORK YANKEES

BY DOM FORKER

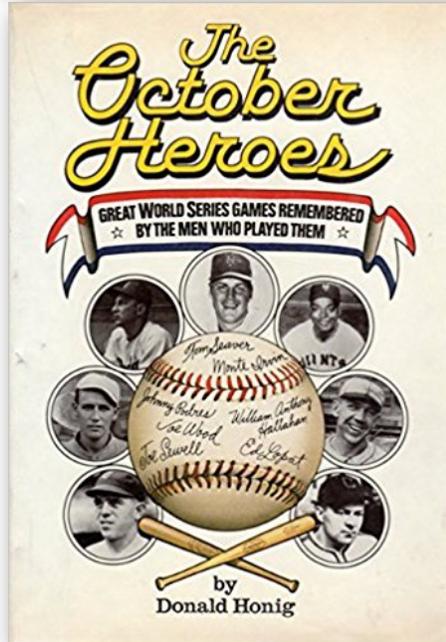
1989. Dallas  
Taylor Publishing.  
[ISBN 978-0-8783-3650-0.  
228 pp. \$3.99 Kindle]

Reviewed by  
**Marty Appel**

My question is, what took so long for such an obvious title? But I digress.

I've always been a fan of well-edited oral histories, and Forker's work captured the recollections of 23 New York Yankee players from 1949-53, the span in which they won an unprecedented five straight world championships. No team has done it since.

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### THE OCTOBER HEROES: GREAT WORLD SERIES GAMES REMEMBERED BY THE MEN WHO PLAYED THEM

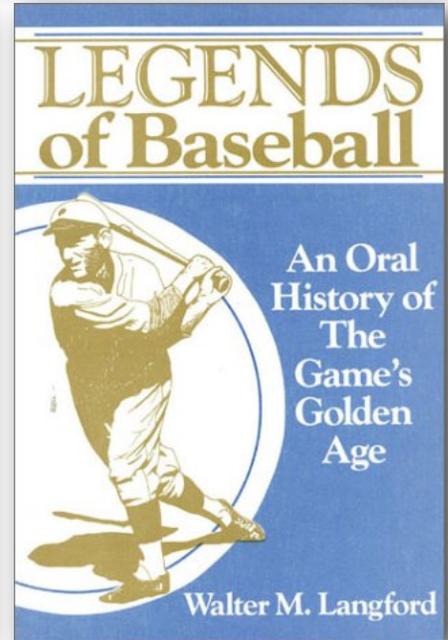
BY DONALD HONIG

1979. New York  
Simon & Schuster  
[ISBN 978-0-6712-3059-3.  
285 pp. \$0.99 Hardcover]

Reviewed by  
**Ben Klein**

"I don't think there's any doubt that baseball is the greatest sport for memories and reminiscing. One story always leads to another." The prolific Donald Honig elicited these words from Hall of Famer Fred Lindstrom in *The October Heroes*, a collection of oral histories recounting the World Series experiences of fifteen legends. Published in 1979, these histories range

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### LEGENDS OF BASEBALL: AN ORAL HISTORY OF THE GAME'S GOLDEN AGE

BY WALTER M. LANGFORD

1987. South Bend, IN  
Diamond Communications  
[ISBN 978-0-9120-8320-9.  
224 pp. \$4.44 Softcover]

Reviewed by  
**Tom Willman**

Capturing the oral history of baseball is often a race against time, an urgent labor of love for the National Pastime.

*Legends of Baseball*, by Walter M. Langford, an admirable, readable collection of baseball lives, touches real importance by that test: Of the 16 players whose interviews are featured, at least five died before the book ever saw

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## ROGERS

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autobiography called *Circling the Bases*, but gradually it came to me that a book that focused just on Bill's baseball experiences and stories would provide a wonderful oral history of baseball in the 1930s from a ballplayer who knew and played with the likes of Babe Ruth, Lou Gehrig, Bill Dickey, Lefty Grove, Jimmie Foxx, Joe Cronin, and Ernie Lombardi.

Werber had been a front-line big league third baseman for eleven years during the thirties and early forties. Signed surreptitiously by the Yankees on the Duke campus after his freshman year,<sup>3</sup> Werber later went on to play for the Yankees, Red Sox, Athletics, Reds, and Giants. He was one of the top baserunners of his day, leading his league in stolen bases three times. He thrice scored more than 100 runs in a season, topping out at 129 runs in 1934 and leading the National League with 115 runs scored in 1939. As leadoff hitter, Werber was the catalyst that propelled the Reds to the National League pennant in 1939 and 1940 and a World Series victory in 1940, where he batted .373 to lead both teams in the seven game series.



***Bill Werber, center  
with Lou Gehrig and Lefty Gomez***

But for an unfortunate kick at a bucket, Werber, a superb athlete, might well be in the Hall of Fame. It happened late in the 1934 season, Werber's second full season in the big leagues.

He was having a banner year, hitting .340 in early September for the Boston Red Sox. Yankees' general manager Ed Barrow was so impressed that he called the 26 year-old Werber the best player in the American League. In those days teams kept water and ice in a tin bucket in the dugout so that the players could cool off during the dog days of summer. Lefty Grove, the great left-hander, had a volatile temper and would often come into the dugout and kick the bucket, sending ice and water everywhere. The Red Sox trainer, Doc Woods, finally got tired of Grove's act and replaced the tin bucket with a heavier one with iron bands riveted around it.

Werber, who also had a temper, shortly afterwards came into the dugout after popping up with men on base and gave the new bucket a swift kick. He wasn't aware that the tin bucket had been replaced and also didn't think to kick with the side of his foot like Grove did, but instead kicked it toes first. His big toe bore the brunt and broke. Werber played through the injury and still hit .321 for the year in 152 games. After the season he had surgery on the toe, but it was never the same and he played in pain for the rest of his major league career.<sup>4</sup>

When I wrote Werber about my idea for a book on baseball in the 1930s, he immediately was all in. And although I had an extensive file on Werber from our correspondence, we both agreed that it was vital to the project that I interview him in person. So Bill invited me to visit him and his wife Tat in Naples, Florida, where they lived in retirement after Werber's successful post-baseball career in the insurance business.

As if I needed further inducement, each time I talked to Bill on the phone about my visit he promised that we would go see Ted Williams while I was there. I, of course, was all for that, but frankly did not think it was likely to happen. I was aware that Williams, who was 79, had suffered a serious stroke and doubted that he'd be taking visitors, particularly from the likes of me.

One of the university hats that I've long worn is as SMU's faculty athletic representative. In those

days I usually attended the NCAA convention, which in 1998 was in Atlanta. So I arranged to fly down to see Bill and Tat in Florida after the convention in mid-January 1998. Bill, who was 89 years old, and a friend picked me up at the Fort Myers airport and almost the first thing Bill said to me was that we were going to see Ted Williams the next day.

Given my doubts, I was very pleasantly surprised. And sure enough, very early the next morning, Bill and I were picked up by two of his friends who were going to accompany us to see Ted. One was a retired doctor whose name has escaped my memory banks and the other was Dick Locker, who had flown in Korea with Williams and was one of his closest friends. I was soon in for another surprise. Although I had a vague recollection that Williams lived in a place called Hernando, Florida, I, for some reason, assumed that, given my limited knowledge of Florida geography, it was about a 30-minute drive from Werber's retirement community. Little did I know that Hernando is well north of Tampa and was more like a four-hour drive up the Gulf Coast from Naples.

But the drive was well worth all that was to come. I had wondered, for example, how Werber knew Williams since Bill had been in the National League when Williams came up with the Red Sox in 1939. On the drive Bill told us that in 1939 the Red Sox had trained in Sarasota while his Cincinnati Reds trained in nearby Tampa. As a result the two clubs played each other frequently and then barnstormed north together after breaking camp, playing in places like Charleston, South Carolina; Durham, North Carolina; and Charleston, West Virginia. Since the two teams shared the same train, Werber got to know the Red Sox and their rookie outfielder. In addition, the two shared a passion for bird hunting and fishing and so over the years had enjoyed visiting from time to time about their mutual passions.

Our first stop once we got to the Hernando area was to the Ted Williams Hitters Hall of Fame Museum. After touring the museum, we drove to Ted's house which was set off by itself on the top of a hill sheltered by large water oaks dripping with moss and with an iron gate with a large number nine in the middle.

We arrived just as Williams was waking up from his midday nap. His daily routine was somewhat unusual, to say the least. He apparently ate a late breakfast, then typically took a long nap before rising and then eating his dinner at about 3 pm. He had a manservant named Frank Brothers who took care of all the cooking and appeared to be very devoted to Ted.

We sat in the den for a few minutes before Ted made his appearance. His booming voice and personality literally filled the room before he was physically present and he was obviously very happy to see Dick Locker and Werber. Although Williams was using a walker, it was quickly clear that the stroke had not affected his mind or his speech one iota.

After we visited for a couple of minutes, a teenage girl in a wheelchair accompanied by a physical therapist came into the den to say goodbye for the day. Her name was Tricia Miranti and she had been in a serious car accident and had met Williams while both were in the same rehab facility close by. Williams had a whirlpool installed in his home and had invited Tricia to come and use it as part of her continuing rehab. So, several days a week, she did just that.

The scene we witnessed as Tricia left will forever be emblazoned in my mind. She had suffered brain damage in her accident and was slumped over to one side of her wheelchair. Ted maneuvered his walker over to her, gave her a hug and a kiss on top of her head, told her he loved her, and said he would see her tomorrow. The whole scene took only a few seconds, but we all had tears in our eyes.

We soon sat down for the mid-afternoon dinner, with Williams at the head of the table. By good fortune, I sat directly to his right on the side of the table, close enough to reach over and touch him. At first he was a little wary of me because Werber had told him we were writing a book together and he thought I was a sportswriter, not his favorite group of people. But I assured him that I was really a law professor and that writing about baseball history was just a hobby, and he seemed to accept that.

Ted had two houseguests so, with the four of us from Naples, there were seven people at dinner. The houseguests were an older man who was a widower and his grown daughter, both from Minnesota. The man had served with Williams in World War II, working as a mechanic on the fighter planes Ted flew.<sup>5</sup> They visited Ted every year and usually stayed a week; we just happened to catch them during their annual trip. This father and daughter were not in any way famous people, but they were special to Ted and he clearly enjoyed having them in his home. While the daughter contributed to the conversation, I don't think her father spoke two words during the almost two hour dinner.

Dinner conversation did revolve mostly around baseball and Ted was the center of attention, as one might expect. He was surprisingly introspective, at one point talking about how he use to get paid for appearing in cigarette commercials in magazines, even though he didn't smoke. He told us that he wouldn't take a drag, but would hold a lighted cigarette and that he probably shouldn't have done even that. But he found the money hard to turn down.



***L-R: C. Paul Rogers III,  
Ted Williams and Bill Werber  
at Williams' Florida home.***

The conversation also got around to his legendary home run in his farewell at bat in Fenway Park in 1960, when he famously refused to doff his cap to the fans as he rounded third base. He admitted to being just plain stubborn, but also wondered if he

should have been quite so recalcitrant. Ted didn't exactly say he would do it differently if he had a second chance, but he certainly had given it a lot of thought in the years since.

Finally, it was time to leave and Ted graciously posed for photos with everyone.<sup>6</sup> Ted had quite obviously enjoyed the visit and told Werber to please come see him again. Bill said that he would, although he knew it was very unlikely that he would be able to, since, as they entered their tenth decade, Tat and he were moving to Charlotte shortly to be nearer their children. I'm pretty sure Ted knew it wouldn't happen either, so it was bittersweet as they said their goodbyes, two old ballplayers nearing the sunset.

The following day, both of us buoyed by the wonderful visit with Ted Williams, Bill and I sat down to work after breakfast. Werber suffered from diabetes, and after eating, gave himself an insulin shot in his thigh, right through his trousers. He had done this a couple of times a day for years and to him it was simply no big deal, just a part of life.<sup>7</sup>

We set to work, with me recording our conversations, upstairs in an alcove that was open to the downstairs. We worked for a couple of hours in the morning and then after lunch for several hours in the afternoon. While we were working, Tat sat silently on a couch below us on the main floor of the condo where she could hear every word. I later asked her about it, and she said that she really enjoyed Bill's baseball stories and reliving that part of their lives together.

That evening the retirement community gave a going away party to Bill and Tat, who, as I mentioned, were shortly moving to Charlotte. The Werbers had lived in Naples for about twenty years and I was fortunate to witness just how revered they were in that community. It was a large gathering and while very jovial on the surface, it was also bittersweet, because everyone knew they were saying their good-byes to the Bill and Tat.

Our collaborative effort was published by SABR a little over three years later,<sup>8</sup> but I would be

disingenuous if I didn't acknowledge that Bill and I had some rocky moments in our relationship leading up to publication. Bill was strong-headed and could be difficult and sometimes his ballplayer's competitive spirit surfaced, but we worked through the issues and came out of the project on good terms. Bill lost Tat in 2000 after seventy years of marriage and struggled without his life partner. It pained him that she didn't live to see our book published.

I flew back for Bill's 100th birthday celebration in Charlotte in June 2008. By this time, he'd lost a leg to diabetes and was roaming the halls on a small, motorized scooter, where he was a terror to the other residents. He was then even harder of hearing than before, but he was sharp as a tack and very pleased that our mutual friend Bill Bozman and I had traveled from afar to help celebrate. The real celebration was a luncheon at a local country club. That evening a smaller gathering of the Werber children and grandchildren had dinner at a local restaurant, without Bill who was exhausted from the day's activities. Daughters Patricia and Susie and son Bill, Jr.,<sup>9</sup> invited me to join them, and made me feel part of the family. It was a kindness I'll always remember.

Bill Werber died about six months later, on January 22, 2009. I'll always treasure our friendship and, of course, that magical afternoon with Bill and Ted Williams in 1998 where I saw two old ballplayers saying their goodbyes.

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<sup>1</sup> Robin Roberts and C. Paul Rogers III, *The Whiz Kids and the 1950 Pennant* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996).

<sup>2</sup> Cooke, it turned out, had a quick wit. Werber told me that once when the two were sitting in the dugout as teammates with the Boston Red Sox, Jimmie Foxx blasted a gargantuan home run in Cleveland's League Park, well over 500 feet. Cooke turned to Werber and said, "It's a damn lie."

<sup>3</sup> The Yankees agreed to pay for the rest of Werber's education at Duke and to keep the signing a secret until he graduated.

<sup>4</sup> Dr. Bobby Brown worked out with the Cincinnati Reds when he was 16 and while Werber was the team's third baseman. He told me that he couldn't figure out why the groundskeepers in Crosley Field had extra dirt all around third base. When I asked Werber about it, he said it was to soften the ground and put less pressure on his chronically painful big toe.

<sup>5</sup> Williams did not serve overseas in World War II, serving as a flight instructor instead after his own pilot training.

<sup>6</sup> Fortunately, no one asked for his autograph. He told us during dinner that he signed autographs for about an hour a day, including copies of his bats which were put in a padded vise so that he sign more easily.

<sup>7</sup> A few years later the diabetes would cause his leg to be amputated below the knee. Still later, doctors wanted to amputate his other leg, but Werber simply refused.

<sup>8</sup> With the help of many good SABR volunteers such as Mark Alvarez, A.W. Suehsdorf, and Glenn LeDoux. My friends Bill Bozman and Ronnie Joyner also contributed mightily to the project by designing the cover gratis.

<sup>9</sup> All three of Werber's children attended Duke University, where Bill had starred in baseball and basketball in the late 20's, becoming Duke's first All-American in the latter sport. Bill, Jr., later became an All-American in baseball at Duke, playing with future National League MVP Dick Groat.

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## MCDONALD *continued from page 4*

completely tailored to whom they are and what insight they can specifically add. In writing a typical reporting piece, I go into the locker room and try to get the ballplayer, through my questions, to give me a *new* perspective about something we *don't* know about the game of baseball. An Oral History is the exact opposite: I am trying to get the athlete to tell their side of what we *already* know. This means the questions are weird sometimes. I know in an Oral History I literally need the players to tell me where they were on the field when a particular event happened. So it feels silly to ask Terry Pendleton (who I knew was standing at third base), "In Game 6, in the ninth inning, where were you when Don Denkinger called Jorge Orta safe?"



***Looks like he might have been out.***  
*Todd Worrell has the ball in his glove  
before Jorge Orta touches first base.*

But such a question allows for an Oral History to be told completely by those involved. An Oral History needs to have the feel of ballplayers sitting around a kitchen table reminiscing as one big, happy family. For 1985 this worked out well, because the players added to the historical record by having the perspective of time. Thirty years later, they understood how their lives were impacted by the series.

After countless hours of tracking people down, conducting interviews and then the process of putting the story together, there is one final part of an Oral History that always makes me tell myself, ***I am never doing this again.*** Every time it circles back to the first issue: tracking people down. There is always one person who I can't find, but I desperately need to make the story complete. For 1985 it was the family of the late Dick Howser, the Royals manager who passed away shortly after the World Series. I can't even publicly admit how many hours (*ahem, weeks*) I spent trying to find Jana and Jill Howser, it's too embarrassing. Finally, when I was ready to give up, in sheer frustration I typed into Google, "I am so frustrated I can't find how to get in touch with Jana Howser!" The answer I needed immediately popped up. Apparently it wasn't so difficult after all.

I will always be grateful for her kindness in not only talking to me, but also adding all the missing pieces of the puzzle to the story. The subject matter was difficult, we were talking about her beloved father, who left this earth far too soon and who made a lasting impact on the game of baseball. I will forever consider Jana and Jill my friends, thrown together as strangers by a crazy idea from a reporter just trying to tell a story.

As with any Oral History, not everything worked out as I imagined it would when I had the idea in mind. And yet this falls back once again to the greatest aspect Oral Histories offer to baseball history, the story comes alive on the page by the passion of those who lived it. As Vince Coleman told me about the beauty of 1985, "Everybody wants the glory, but they don't want to know the story. It's always in the story. There's a great story behind every successful athlete. It wasn't served up on a platter." And the same is true for Oral Histories, they are a lot of hard work, it takes a lot of time and dedication to put the story together. But they are a powerful medium to show how a simple baseball game is more than what shows up in the final box score.

*For the past six 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.*

Forker didn't get Mickey Mantle, Joe DiMaggio, or Whitey Ford, from whom we would have liked to hear. But it is often the lesser-known players who are doing more observing, dealing with issues and self-confidence and better harboring recollections. The formula worked well here; Forker was a good interviewer.

That he begins with Allie Reynolds, Vic Raschi and Ed Lopat puts us on the right path. Baby Boomers (myself included) sort of missed the era of these three, whose run with the Yankees was over by 1955, when we were too young to fully appreciate them. But what stalwarts they were—not only for their reliable work on the pitching mound, but for their leadership and presence on this historic team. Indeed, Reynolds, Raschi and Lopat went 364-169 for the Yankees, 16-6 in the World Series, and never seemed to miss a start. (Reynolds pitched a lot of relief as well.)

When Raschi, who had won 21 games three years in a row, made the mistake of going only 13-6 in the championship season of 1953, George Weiss, the Yankees general manager, sent him a contract with a 25 percent pay cut.

In retrospect, this was a seismic moment in Yankee history, in the days when management could put you in your place and you had no recourse. "I didn't think it was necessary and I wouldn't sign," he told Forker. "I guess in the back of their minds they knew they were going to get rid of me. When they sold me to the Cardinals, no one ever said a thing to me. The first time I knew I had been sold was when the reporters surrounded my house in St. Petersburg."

Looking back at the sale of Raschi today, it was cruel, high-handed and unnecessary (or, one could argue, brilliant, as he had only sixteen more wins and an ERA over 5.00 for the final two seasons of his career with the Cardinals and Athletics). But it was a statement by management to toe the line...or else. Of course, the Yankees being the Yankees, they found an immediate replacement in Rookie of the Year Bob Grim (20-6), (Ford was already in the rotation by then), and kept winning.

Reynolds was disheartened enough by the treatment of Raschi to walk away the following year, retiring at 37 after a 13-4, all-star selection season.

A poignant passage emerged in the Reynolds chapter, with Allie commenting on his post-baseball life: "(A)fter my wife Earlene died, I decided to retire [from business]. It was a tough time for me. I've got diabetes and lymphoma. I've been off chemotherapy for three or four months. They say they've got it under control. But the guy who has it is never really sure. Four years ago, my son Allie and my grandson Michael, who was a student at Oklahoma State, were killed in an airplane crash...My father died last year. Right now my mother is on a life-support system in a nursing home. And soon as you and I finish talking, my brother is coming over and we're going to decide whether we should tell them to take her off the support system. Even with it, she only has a week or two to live...so I'm glad you got in touch with me. You've allowed me to turn back the clock. To take my mind off my problems for a few hours and think of happier days."

Memories are shared by Bobby Brown, Phil Rizzuto, Spec Shea, Hank Bauer, Billy Johnson, Johnny Sain, Joe Ostrowski, Bob Kuzava, Yogi Berra, Cliff Mapes, Johnny Mize, Irv Noren, Billy Martin, Charlie Silvera, Gil McDougald, Joe Collins, Gene Woodling, Tommy Byrne, Tom Ferrick and Gerry Coleman. Only Brown, Kuzava, Noren and Silvera are still living; Raschi died before the book was published.

Forker had a good style with his interview subjects and was successful in getting them to open up. He edited the interviews with skill and provided good introductory remarks for each player to properly set him in context.

A year after *Men of Autumn*, Forker returned with *Sweet Seasons*, recollections of Yankee players from 1955-64. This time he got Mantle and Ford. The two volumes together are important elements of Yankee literature.

*Former Yankee PR Director/Television Producer Marty Appel is the author of 24 books including Munson, Pinstripe Empire and Casey Stengel.*

temporally from Smoky Joe Wood's dominance over John McGraw's Giants in 1912, to Gene Tenace's most unlikely offensive onslaught against the Big Red Machine in 1972. Despite the span from the dusk of the Victorian Era to the dawn of the Watergate Era, Honig's anthology manages to suspend time, and leads the reader to fully appreciate Lindstrom's maxim. Not only does each story always lead to another, but Honig also leaves the reader with the feeling that the episodes of baseball and its Fall Classic make up a single cohesive story that continues to unfold before our transfixed eyes.

That story begins with a child who occupies his time playing baseball and occupies his thoughts with wild dreams of World Series glory. Those dreams may be fed by gazing daily upon Yankee Stadium from the elevated train on the way to school, as was the case for Ed Lopat, or by rapaciously devouring two day old news of the 1914 World Series as soon as it arrived in Titus, Alabama, as was the case for Joe Sewell. The story progresses as the child is forged into a ballplayer and the ballplayer into a Major Leaguer. Sometimes the transition to the Majors is eased by the presence of a familiar face, such as when Lloyd Waner joined his older brother Paul when he ascended to the Pirates to form the duo of Big and Little Poison. But the transition can be difficult, as it was for Fred Lindstrom, who broke in with the Giants to find that his teammates were made aloof by their success.

Once the dream of reaching the Majors is realized, the promise of playing in the World Series beckons. In the case of Phil Cavaretta, the breakthroughs came in quick succession, as he joined the Cubs midseason in 1934 and found himself squaring off against the Tigers in the World Series the very next year. In contrast, Ted Kluszewski played in the Majors for twelve seasons before making his World Series debut in 1959 for the White Sox. The big man made his only World Series count, driving in ten runs and clubbing three homers in a losing effort against the Dodgers. One of those home runs was surrendered by Johnny Podres in game six,

which was won by the Dodgers to clinch the series. Although Podres got a no decision on that day, he won four World Series games over the course of his career. Of those four wins, his shutout victory in game seven of the 1955 World Series stands above the rest, as it gave Brooklyn its first and only World Series title. But for every winner there is a loser, and history records the Yankees' Tommy Byrne as the loser of that decisive game, despite his masterful pitching in the series.

In baseball, the destiny of each player is tied to the exploits of others. So it was in game one of the 1915 World Series when Ernie Shore's solid pitching performance was not enough for the Red Sox to overcome the dominance of the Phillies' young ace, Grover Cleveland Alexander. So it was again in 1926 when Les Bell, Bill Hallahan, and their Cardinal teammates depended upon the heroics of a decidedly more grizzled Grover Cleveland Alexander to deliver St. Louis its very first World Series championship.

*The October Heroes* tells this story as it was experienced by these men, and it subtly makes the case that baseball should not be understood as a linear progression that is punctuated by the cold, hard facts of World Series wins, losses, and statistics. Instead, Honig's book reminds us that baseball's truest meaning is rooted in the experience that unfolds during the creation of those facts. Each Oral History is essentially a variation on this same essential experience, whether told by Deadball Era heroes or expansion era stars. *The October Heroes* demonstrates the commonalities between Smoky Joe Wood's World Series memories and those of Tom Seaver. This linkage encourages the reader to believe that the same essential experience lives on through Ben Zobrist and Rajai Davis, and that it will endure as long as baseball is played and the World Series is contested.

*Editor's note:*

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

## **WILLMAN** *continued from page 8*

print in 1987. In barely another year, four more were gone. Carl Hubbell, Charlie Grimm, Travis Jackson, Babe Herman, Glenn Wright, Larry French: Langford recorded a lot of saves with *Legends of Baseball*.

And in the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary year of this book's publication, a reading is a reminder of how rapidly these baseball lives and times are shrinking in our rear-view mirror.

Consider Glenn Wright, perhaps the book's single most satisfying interview. A solid shortstop for Pittsburgh and Brooklyn, his career was basically just 10 years (1924-1933) and serially interrupted by injury. Today, he's a vague and distant star. But in his day he was something--a 1920s shortstop who batted cleanup and who had four seasons of 100-plus RBIs. He could hit; he could run; he had a rifle arm and, in this book, teammate Al Lopez says Wright and third baseman Pie Traynor "formed probably the finest left side of an infield anyone ever saw." Travis Jackson, the Hall of Fame Giants shortstop of that era, also interviewed in this book, picks Wright as "an all-around standout," and the best National League shortstop he played against.

Langford interviewed Wright in May 1982. Wright suffered a debilitating stroke later that year and died in 1984. That race against time was close. But Langford won and our baseball histories are the richer for it.

And that's the way of it. Langford credited Lawrence Ritter and Donald Honig for inspiring him. Ritter's *The Glory of Their Times*, of course, is the seminal modern baseball oral history, generally short-listed (if not acclaimed) as the best baseball book ever. Ritter set out to record his interviews in 1962, spurred by the death in 1961 of Ty Cobb (and that of his own father that same year). Ritter challenged his friend Honig to take up the quest. Honig began his interviews in 1974. The wonderful result, *Baseball When the Grass was Real*, was published in 1975. One of Honig's interviews, Hall of Famer Lefty Grove, died that spring. Another, pitcher Wes Ferrell, died the next year.

All the interviews for *Legends of Baseball* were conducted between 1982 and 1985. Langford (1908-2001) had by then retired after 40 years

as a professor of Modern Languages at the University of Notre Dame. He coached tennis and fencing, too, but growing up in Texas, baseball was his first love. Not surprisingly, the subtitle of his book, *An Oral History of the Game's Golden Age*, reflects a primary focus on the sport he fell in love with in the 1920s and '30s.

In some ways, Langford's technique is more journalism than oral history. He uses long quotes from his subjects, but supplies the matrix of historical narrative in his own words. Still, the atmosphere of a bygone era comes through nicely.

As on the spitball, for instance. Here's Babe Herman asserting that Red Faber's spitter "acted like it broke twice." Herman also said Burleigh Grimes (the last legal practitioner) could break his spitter in or out. Addendum, Charlie Grimm: "Burleigh would dust you off with a spitball, you know. He wouldn't throw his fastball at you, but he'd knock you down with a spitball."

Carl Hubbell remarks that back then, the Star-Spangled Banner wasn't played at every game -- just at All-Star and World Series contests. Hubbell remembered hearing it before Game One of the '33 Series. He called it his most emotional moment. Glenn Wright remembered hearing it at the '25 Series. "I still think that was my biggest thrill," he says, "because the cold chills ran up and down me and it was just wonderful to be in America and to be in that spot."

Throughout *Legends of Baseball* is a tribute to America's National Pastime of that earlier day. Long out of print, the book can still be found in many libraries as well as online. Meanwhile, key Walter Langford recordings, including that of Wright, are among the SABR Oral History Committee's assets. In fact, much of Wright's legacy is in SABR hands. Eugene Murdock interviewed him for SABR's 1979 *Baseball Research Journal*. These inform Warren Corbett's SABR Bioproject entry. All are available to researchers.

*For Walter Langford bio info, see:*

<http://www.und.com/genrel/060101aaf.html>

[http://www.baseball-reference.com/bullpen/Walter\\_M.\\_Langford](http://www.baseball-reference.com/bullpen/Walter_M._Langford)

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