

Society for American Baseball Research

BIBLIOGRAPHY COMMITTEE

NEWSLETTER

February 1994 (94-1)

Comments from a Co-Chair

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Two excellent books of recent years deal with causes of the hitting/slugging explosion of the 1920s, the quality of 1920s and 1930s competition versus that of later times, and related matters: *Big Sticks: The Phenomenal Decade of Ruth, Gehrig, Cobb, and Hornsby* (HarperPerennial, 1990), by SABR member Bill Curran; and *Clearing the Bases: Baseball Then and Now* (Michael Kesend Pub., 1989), by former catcher and club owner Bill Starr. Both authors convincingly reject the long-standing assumptions that the baseball establishment surreptitiously introduced a "lively ball" to stimulate long hitting after the Babe lighted the way. In general agreement, both point up various factors that did contribute to further the hitting splurge, Starr in greater detail. Curran provides a classic, definitive history of the baseball in his chapter, "Of Rabbit Balls and the Power of Myth"; he then focuses on the said splurge through the 1920s to its apex during 1930.

Starr makes a strong case that in the 1920s and 1930s the game was played with a proficiency and intensity unsurpassed in any other era in baseball's history. Then, from his field-level perception, he describes what he believes what since has gone amiss. He concludes with a sharp, bitter attack on sabermetrics and other statistical evaluation systems, which he claims obscure and distort the essence and finesse of the sport as perceived by its insiders, not the fans, and elevate the reputations of modern players, unrealistically, at the expense of pre-World War II stars.

Switching gears, the *Baseball Register* indexing project proceeds satisfactorily, although no other members of the Bibliography Committee have participated to date or offered suggestions or criticisms, pro or con. While intended to be a Committee activity, the project instead has become a personal effort supported by certain valuable help from SABR members Pete Palmer and Rick Benner. I have completed subject name indexes for each of the 54 annuals (through 1993) by manually transcribing names, page by page, in the sequences in which they appear. In toto, approximately 47,000 individual entries break down as follows: 41,000 for active players, 3000 for coaches, and 1000 each for managers, umpires, and former stars. If my advance guesstimate of 4.5 entries per person holds, the total number of subject names will be about 10,500.

Much of the work of preparing the alphabetized rosters of managers, coaches, umpires, and former stars already has been done by Rick and me. The more formidable task of finalizing the active player roster will take time but Pete's checking of entries against his *Total Baseball* player-name database and use of my 54 (soon to be 55 with publication of the 1994 *Register*) indexes provide the track on which to proceed. Besides cross-references for men whose names appear in two or more categories, I now plan to identify by a symbol those active players who never participated in a major league game.

Ed Walton called my attention to two special limited editions of the *Register*: an All-Star Edition for 1941 (perhaps for a Chicago

market only) and a Special Servicemen's Edition in 1945. Steve Gietschier, *The Sporting News* archivist, tells me the TSN library has copies of these two editions, but no others. I have a hunch other limited special editions may have been issued during the earlier years of the series. Do any of you know of any others? If so, I would much appreciate learning of them. And, today, if you do have thoughts, comments, or suggestions about any aspects of the project, I would like to hear from you.

Baseball Online Project

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Baseball Online continues to make steady progress. In addition to the commercials here in the Bibliography Committee newsletter, *The SABR Bulletin* allotted two pages to the project in its Oct. 1993 issue. And SABR President David Pietrusza mentioned the project in his column. Several other committee newsletters have picked up and repeated our appeal, while mentioning special pieces of Baseball Online that might be of interest to their committee members.

Ted Hathaway (5645 Fremont Ave. South, Minneapolis, MN 55419) made a plea at a Minnesota regional meeting and I did one at the Los Angeles regional. In addition, I've been writing to all other regional organizers as their meetings come up and asking for a plug. Ted has been in contact with Paul White of *USA Today Baseball Weekly* and a conversation Ted had with *Baseball America* resulted in a nice little story in that publication.

As a result, we've had a large number of new people express interest in the project, some of whom had never heard of SABR before. We've been sending manuals to these people and hope to begin getting lots of entries.

Ted's group is forging ahead with the periodicals. But this is a group that can always use more volunteers willing to read *The Sporting News* or *Sports Illustrated* or whatever. In addition, Ted has been tapping into a number of electronic databases and picking up entries from them.

On the books side, I have been able to put together the first version of our base list. It contains 10,963 entries. About 10,000 of these are rudimentary and need full cataloging. I would guess the final list will be about 15,000 entries. Again, any volunteers—especially those with runs of publications, such as guides, or *Street & Smith* yearbooks, or team yearbooks—will be welcomed.

Any Bibliography Committee member who can speak at a regional meeting about the project and to seek more volunteers would also be doing valuable work.

Book Reviews

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BASEBALL IN THE AFTERNOON: Tales from a Bygone Era
Robert Smith. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993. \$21

In some ways, the title of Smith's book misleads. It suggests that we will visit once again the good old days, when none of baseball's current problems existed, and the game was simple and idyllic. This is not quite the case, as readers of Smith's *Baseball* (1947) already know. Smith is one of the first historians to have understood that professional baseball is best considered as an economic, social, and cultural system. There is no nostalgia in *Baseball in the Afternoon*. The book is a personal and anecdotal history of the

professional game up to the late 1930s, when night baseball began to be introduced into the majors.

One of the pleasures of this book is that there are no rules. Smith talks about whom he wants to, when he wants to, and for how long he wants to. The book is in no way a formal history, and its focus is always on individuals. There is a whole chapter, for instance, on St. Louis Browns' owner Chris von der Ahe, "The Greatest Feller in Baseball", and the next chapter, "Disorderly Conduct", is a series of anecdotes of the colorful baseball careers and difficult lives of Louis Sockalexis, Big Ed Delahanty, Pete Browning, Toad Ramsey, Fred (Sure Shot) Dunlap, and others.

Smith doesn't keep his opinions a secret. For instance, there is a wonderfully positive portrait of George Weiss as a minor league executive in the chapter, "Life in the Bushes". In that same chapter there is a brief, and to me startling, belittling of Joe DiMaggio's 56-game hitting streak as "an artificial contrivance" (p.185).

In the chapter, "Crossing the Line", Smith is also hard on professional baseball for excluding blacks. The depth of his anger is best conveyed in the following brief anecdote: "A teenage baseball player, farmed out to a club in a small southern city, had his stomach violently turned one day when a car full of angry white men sped by, dragging behind it the severed head of a black man. The guy had attacked a white girl, the boy was told. He also learned later that the lynchers had 'got the wrong man' and were sorry" (p.137).

In a chapter called "False Gods", the last false god is restaurateur Toots Shor, who gets a thorough going-over (p.236-242). In the process, we learn about life on the peripheries of major league baseball.

The greatest false god is Kenesaw Mountain Landis, first commissioner of baseball, who gets most of Smith's attention in the chapter. Smith perhaps attempts too much, and to understand the complexities of Landis' assumption of the commissionership and of his decisions as commissioner, the reader should consult Eugene Murdock's 1982 biography of Ban Johnson, Clark Nardinelli's article "Judge Kenesaw Mountain Landis and the Art of Cartel Enforcement" in *Baseball History* (premier ed., 1989), and perhaps my own *The American Dream and the National Game* (1975). Smith includes a section on Landis' relationship with J.G. Taylor Spink, publisher of *The Sporting News*, which contains material previously unfamiliar to me. None of it disturbs Smith's judgment that "Landis was possessed of a breathtaking egotism and an almost pathological urge to flaunt his power" (p. 213).

Smith concludes the book with anecdotes from his now career as an amateur softball player, and his judgment about baseball in the concluding paragraphs can stand as this reader's judgment of his book. Here it is. He speaks of "the spirit that originally informed the game of baseball in those ancient afternoons":

It was not a religious experience. Not a sacred rite.

Not a tournament of knights errant.

It was fun.

A FAREWELL TO HEROES

Frank Graham, Jr. New York: Viking Press, 1981. 302p.

I'm not sure when I acquired *A Farewell to Heroes*. It's been on my book shelves, unread, for a while, the product of some so far undeveloped interest in sports journalism. I assumed it was a biography by his son of Frank Graham, who I knew to be the author of several team histories in the Putnam series. Recently, because I was working on indexes for his *The New York Giants* (1952) and *McGraw of the Giants* (1944), I decided to read his son's book, hoping to get some insight into how he composed those two Putnam books.

I don't remember either book being mentioned in *A Farewell to Heroes*, which is not a biography of Frank Graham. It is a very different sort of book, and I found reading it a wonderful experience. Its subject is not baseball, but baseball is the main subject of half of its 24 chapters. It's a book about "the little universe my father fash-

ioned around me" (p.xii), the world of sports and sports journalism in New York City between roughly 1915 and 1965. Here is Graham's description of the purpose of the book (p.xiii):

"... an attempt to re-create an atmosphere, to set down not a history of sports during that half century or so but a kind of dual autobiography, a very selective overview, gold-tinted perhaps but as honest as the two of us could make it, of an era that now comes dimming up out of the mists."

How can a book be a "dual autobiography"? Easily, as it turns out. Much of the book is about the elder Graham, a journalist described by his son as being "mainly interested in boxing, and in the Giants" (p.4). In fact, the chapters on boxing are among the most interesting in the book. The younger Graham spends much of the early part of the book on his father's work as a journalist, saying of him that he "revered the past; he reveled in tradition. ... His sentimentality served him well in his writing, because it was mixed with an accurate ear and a kind of genius for anecdote" (p.32). And in fact the book is, in good part, a generous anthology of the father's newspaper columns and excerpts from his books.

But it's also more than this. From the late 1940s to the mid-1950s, Graham Jr. worked in the publicity department of the Brooklyn Dodgers, and the reader also gets this story from his perspective. He finally decided against a career in baseball management, citing his father's influence (p.242):

"Baseball was simply old records and pulsations and the tatters of romance that my father had pulled from chaos itself and pieced together on his typewriter into enchanting coherence. Perhaps I had rearranged the pattern a little to suit myself, but I dwelt in the same rabbit hole. Contracts, tickets, and construction bills were not a part of that mise-en-scène."

Meanwhile, we have one more perspective on the boys of summer. Here is Graham Jr. on Jackie Robinson (p.271):

"He played with an imagination and abandon that transcended baseball. After watching him harass an enemy team to the point of despair and disintegration, all of us came away from the ball park with a sense of excitement that was more than animal stimulation; we knew now that life held possibilities, if only we rushed to meet it, as Jackie drove himself to take charge of a ball game."

For Graham Jr. all this represents a heroic past now disappeared forever. Here is one final quotation, in which he remembers the celebration in the streets outside the Dodgers' offices after the team had won the 1955 World Series (p.278):

"The Dodgers are gone from Brooklyn now, and so are Ebbets Field and the old office building on Montague Street. But the voices hurled into that long-ago night by the crowd in front of the Bossert must still be around there somewhere. They had been held in for a long time, and there was a feeling that one had better let it all out while there was still a chance. A great many of us were beginning to say a long farewell to our heroes."

New Members of the Bibliography Committee

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