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Legends as an Expression of Baseball Memory

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In most of us is some affection for, or attachment to, the past. This is especially true of the ways in which it impinges upon one's own life. This is not uniformly true, of course. Those unfortunates whose early years were blighted do not have such a feeling. Possibly also there are some younger people in whom the impact of technological devices in entertainment-and most notably television-may have dulled the nostalgic sense. Even if so, this amounts only to its attenuation, not its obliteration. With most, there comes the feeling occasionally that the past and present are interwoven, with the pleasant moments of the former most readily recalled. We share, even if we cannot so well express, Edmund Burke's reflection that with regard to the overarch of our lives, " . . . the whole at one time, is never old or middle-aged or young, but in a condition of unchanging constancy."[1]

Obviously this sense of a continuum, especially on its agreeable side, finds varied expression. In our society, a considerable segment of the public finds a fruitful area of realization in the sphere of spectator sports. Of course, the primary source of satisfaction lies in the immediate visual pleasure of observing the different sports played at a high level of skill. Further, all the major sports have by now a recognizable past on which to draw or to which to refer. This enables those who have been engrossed in a sport long enough to become sophisticates to enjoy an important cerebral benefit as well. This is the sometimes vivid, sometimes only half-conscious recollection of earlier play, either through direct participation or witness, or via word of mouth or the printed page.

This occasional or sometimes even eager desire to recall has as its source the recollections of childhood and youth, when pure and intense were the joys. In the memory, time has stood still, and the players and the crowd remain as fresh and as young as when originally seen. The remembrance of things past revives the link between youth and adulthood, thus providing a certain needed reas-

1. Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France,* ed. J. G. A. Pocock (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), 30.

surance that life's interconnectedness is still intact. In the elderly, this sometimes is important as a means to combat loneliness, disconnectedness, and the fear of amnesia. As for the young, recollection is not yet important, but their elders' transmission of distant joys helps stir among some an interest in the past that enables them later, in their turn, to become custodians and transmitters of a game's traditions. [2]

I.

Among our major sports, it may be that baseball is especially well suited to the intermingling of what once was with what yet is. It has the most ancient past, thus offering a deep and varied tradition. Despite many changes, its fundamental rules have varied very little in this century, thereby insuring relative constancy of performance. Confronted with a representation of a long-ago game, the average fan has little trouble recognizing the similarity to the present-day pastime. Further, the compilation of player and team statistics enhances the appeal to the past by inviting comparisons of distant performers with their modern-day counterparts. The surge of histories and specialized studies in recent years serves a similar function.

Baseball has another rich lode through which its heritage is transmitted to the present. This is the stockpile of legends. Whereas averages and and histories are very concrete and all but self-explanatory, legends are far less tangible. Even the word itself has become ambiguous, for by now legend, myth, anecdote, and folklore-and especially the first two-are used almost interchangeably. Nevertheless, the distinction that is usually drawn between legend and myth seems applicable to baseball lore. A legend is a narrative that originates in the recent past, usually is believed by both recounter and recipient, and lays claim to historicity. A myth originates in remote or even prehistoric times, and concerns the transcendent, in that its principals are semi- or full-fledged deities. Clearly, then, baseball's tales, although regularly referred to as myths, are actually legends. [3]

The primary function of a baseball legend is to lift an episode from the past, and imprint it memorably on the present. Typically, inflation and occasionally even misrepresentation are part of the process. This seriously diminishes the proportion of authenticity in a tale, but the absence of this trait would mean no legend-making. Legends also include at least two other facets. One is their expression of the overwhelming male ethos of the sport, in that the stories invariably have to do with men, their egos, their conflicts, their foibles, and

2. See Bruce Kuklick, *To Every Thing a Season: Shibe Park and Urban Philadelphia, 1909-1976* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1991), especially 6-7, 110-111, 182-187, 190-193, wherein the author brilliantly recaptures the spirit of old sports enjoyments, baseball particularly. See also Warren Goldstein, *A History of Early Baseball* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991). esp. 2-3, 68-69. Fred Davis, *Yearning for Yesterday: A Sociology of Nostalgia* (New York: Free Press, 1979). passim, offers a useful analysis of the various aspects of nostalgia, and especially pp. 52-73, "The Life Cycle."

3. Wayland D. Hand, ed., *American Folk Lore: A Symposium.* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1971) 4, 37. See also Tristan P. Coffin, *The Old Ball Game Baseball in Folklore and Fiction* (New York, Herder and Herder, 1971). 30-31, wherein the same distinction is drawn.

their often crude and slightly immature sense of humor. The other is that some of the tales include threads of resemblance to familiar national legends, thereby illustrating the proposition that baseball is a mirror of America.[4]

Since forgotten stories have no history while memorable ones flourish as legends, what ingredients are essential to a tale's survival? So natural a question is not susceptible to a fully convincing answer. Survival factors seem localized in particular yarns, with generalization possible only to the extent of observing that the better known the principals, and the more unusual and unexpected the event, the greater is the likelihood that a tale will achieve longevity. A closely related question concerns precisely how an incident is kept alive long enough to become a legend. The answer again is inconclusive. Most likely, the transmission process is the same as in the spread of a rumor: a chain of individuals becomes anonymous collaborators in spreading an improbable story.[5] In this connection, it is worth noting that a rumor can be the origin point of what later develops into a legend.[6]

When we turn to the content of baseball legends, what are their most typical characteristics? One unfailing ingredient is the aforementioned hyperbole. One reason why this is invariably present is that as time passes, the memory finds pleasure in romanticizing a person or an event, thus leading easily to a story's embellishment.[7] Another reason, when the survival of a tale depends partly on the recollection of an active participant, is the fallibility of the memory. The longer the time elapse, the greater is the likelihood of inaccuracy. [8] Further, such is the nature of self-admiration that the tale-teller will very probably inflate his own role.[9]

Since a legend is never entirely a feat of someone's imagination, a second essential is that it has at its core some sort of happening that inspired it, whatever may be the layers of exaggeration that then accrue. The extent of the overstatement varies from tale to tale. Usually a moderately heavy to a very thick coating may be expected. A legend that, in relation to the bedrock facts—when they are ascertainable-contains at least a halfway quotient of truth is one with a better than average proportion of veracity.

A third rather common feature is the repetitive quality of old tales. That is, an original story is sufficiently enjoyable or memorable so that it shows up at a later time than its origin, with a fresh cast of characters and a disclaimer of any antecedents. A typical example is one that is usually given an early 1930's

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4. For evidence to substantiate the statements in the accompanying paragraph, see legends that follow.

5. Tamotsu Shibutani, *Improvised News: A Sociological Study of Rumor* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1966), 6-11.

6. Ibid., 155-156.

7. Oscar Handlin, *Truth in History* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1979). 125; John Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy* (New York: H. Holt and Company, 1920), 38.

8. Jacques Barzun and Henry F. Graff, *The Modern Researcher,* 4th ed., (San Diego: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1985). 167.

9. Edward S. Casey, *Remember: A Phenomenological Study* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1987), Chapter VI "Reminiscing," 107: Few ". . . can resist the temptation to embroider storywise upon otherwise banal reminiscences."

setting. While warming up in the bullpen one day in a game against the Philadelphia Athletics, Yankee pitcher Henry Johnson paused to buy a hot dog. He had just taken a bite when he was called into the game. Told that there were no outs, the bases were filled, and sluggers Mickey Cochrane, Al Simmons, and Jimmy Foxx were coming up, he put down his snack, and admonished his bullpen companions, "Don't touch this hot dog. I'll be right back." Actually, this is an updated version of a tale that dates back to the teens, with Detroit stars Ty Cobb, Sam Crawford, and Bobby Veach as the batsmen. Interestingly, the original narrator-at least in its twentieth century form-was Ring Lardner.[10]

A fourth element in the makeup of legends is a tendency for a declining number of new tales to appear. Probably one reason is that the legends mostly date back to earlier, less routinized days in the game's evolution, and as it has become increasingly institutionalized and structured, the surroundings favorable to the growth of new oversized stories has diminished. A related factor may be that in our current ultra-realistic, warts-and-all era, the environment is not conducive to fresh births, because legends in their formative period need the nourishment provided by the suspension of disbelief. The result is that there are fewer really innovative legends, with the old ones remaining part of the tradition, or regenerating with a contemporary cast, thereby benefitting from currently familiar name identification.

A final and vexing trait of legends is that there is so often a vagueness of origins that it becomes almost impossible to track down the original source, and thus make an assessment of the relationship between the originating event and the tale in its full-blown form. On precisely what occasion, if any, did Rube Waddell perform his awesome feat of calling in the fielders and striking out the side? Just when did Jay Kirke invite his wife to stick to the cooking, and leave the hitting to him? Since Jay's sassy remark is the gist of the anecdote, the reader or listener is left to conclude that Mrs. Kirke accepted this rebuff quietly. We have no way of knowing when the dialogue occurred, so we are unable to assess its accuracy, and must simply accept on faith this tale of male supremacy.

To surmount this difficulty, the three legends that follow have the advantage of a specific circumscribed time frame, making it feasible to explore them in depth. They are analyzed in terms of the circumstances that gave rise to each, the actual, as distinct from the legendary facts comprising them, and the reasons for the appeal that makes each a part of baseball's species of group memory. Then, in order to view them in perspective, they are compared in their internal dynamics with probably the most familiar baseball legend, Babe Ruth's "called shot" home run in the 1932 World Series.

II.

The first case is the legend that tight-fisted White Sox owner Charles A. Comiskey late in the 1917 or 1919 season ordered his manager to keep Eddie Cicotte out of games in order to prevent him from winning thirty games, and thus collecting a $10,000 bonus. The story is usually placed in 1919, and given

10. *The SABR Bulletin 17* (January, 1987): 8.

as the reason why Cicotte participated in the "throwing" of the World Series that year. [11] Over the years, it has been repeated many times, and most recently before a very broad audience in the John Sayles's popular 1988 movie Eight Men *Out.* Most legends contribute to the body of lore that comprises the collective memory, but here is a rare instance in which it would be better if this fragment of tradition would fade from baseball's recollective faculty.

When and how did the legend appear? In all probability, it emerged first soon after Cicotte's confession of participation in the 1919 "fixed" World Series before the Chicago grand jury in late September 1920. Possibly, it was not until after the trial of the eight "Black Sox" in July 1921 when the salaries of the players became known. It is very improbable that the tale dates from any time prior to the revelations of the Black Sox scandal, because until then the details of the White Sox owner-player relations were not a matter of public knowledge.

Just why such a tale should arise is easy to understand. Comiskey's penuriousness had been known in a general way for some time. By taking maximum advantage of the owners' reserve clause, he was able to squeeze nearly all his star players' salaries to sums much below their ability. Bonuses somewhat mitigated the underpayment, but, even so, they enabled Comiskey to maintain a low salary base at negotiating time. As for Cicotte, in the five years prior to 1919, he had won a total of 68 games, a (rather poor) second only to the great Walter Johnson, had led the league in 1916 with a .682 winning percentage, and in 1917 finished first with 28 wins, 1.53 ERA, and 347 innings pitched. Clearly this record made him one of the American League's foremost hurlers. [12] For 1919, his fellow stars Ty Cobb, Walter Johnson, and the rapidly rising Babe Ruth earned $20,000, about $15,000, and $10,000 respectively, and teammate Eddie Collins received $15,000.[13] As for Cicotte, after eleven and a fraction years of service-almost equal to Johnson's—he pocketed $5,712 in base pay, $3,000 in a bonus, and $285.00 for the World Series games, for a total just under $9,000.00.[14] Clearly, he was underpaid, although, because of the bonus, perhaps not quite as much as is generally thought. Actually, Cicotte banked much more that year, through receiving his losing share of the World Series—$3,254.16—plus his bribe from the gamblers for losing two games—$10,000.[15] Altogether, he made more than $20,000, a large income for 1919.

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11. Recently the old story has undergone something of a revival, partly through John Sayles's movie *Eight* Men Out, and partly indirectly via the effort to rehabilitate Joe Jackson. Thus, long-ago Chicago White Sox outfielder and later Texas University baseball coach Bibb Falk, who played for the 1920, but not the 1919 White Sox, confidently reasserted the Cicotte-Comiskey allegation in the last year of his long life. *See Dallas Morning* News, November 4, 1988.

12. *The Baseball Encyclopedia,* 4th ed. (New York: MacMillan, 1979), 1634.

13. John D. McCallum, *Ty Cobb* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1975) 97; Robert W. Creamer, *Babe (New* York: Simon and Schuster, 1974). 184; Harold Seymour, *Baseball: The Golden Age* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971) 207; Bill Veeck, *The Hustler's Handbook* (New York: Putnam, 1965) 256.

14. New *York Times,* July 8, 1921—expelled players' 1919 salaries were submitted as evidence in "Black Sox" trial.

15. New *York Times,* September 29, 1920—Cicotte's testimony before grand jury, September 28; *The Sporting News Official World's Series Records 1903-1982* (St. Louis, The Sporting News, 1983). 69—the losers' share 1919 World Series.

However, the salary from his regular employer represented less than half of that total.

While the above details and comparisons were not available at the time, the general picture of a star receiving less than his due from a skinflint owner was familiar to fans and reporters alike. When much of this information became public in 1920 and 1921, it was easy to recall that in 1917 Cicotte missed winning thirty by just two games and in 1919 by only one. Given this background, it looks as if it took only gossip and unverified newspaper reports to do the rest. [16] The Comiskey-Cicotte story is a likely example of rumor as an important ingredient in what eventually became a legend. [17] In various ways, the actual scenario does not correspond with the tale. To begin, in what year, 1917 or 1919, did the rumored deprivation occur? Usually-as in the movie—1919 is assumed, in order to provide Cicotte with a strong motive for throwing games. Undoubtedly this year makes for a better story. Surprisingly, though, Eliot Asinof in his all but definitive *Eight Men* Out-on which the movie is based—attributes it a little doubtfully to 1917. [18]

That the event did not occur in the earlier year is plain. Cicotte ended August 1917 with 21 wins. He went on to win seven straight in September, pitching on 2, 3, 8, 14, 16, 19, 25, and 29—eight times in one month. Between September 3 and 8 were two rainouts, between 8 and 14, three, between 19 and 25, one off day, between 25 and 29, one rainout, and the season ended on 30. [19] Thus, clearly, Cicotte won every possible game he could have that year.

What about the perfect year for the story, 1919? Here, though the picture is more complicated, it may be said from the outset that Comiskey did not prevent Cicotte from winning thirty. First, the scheme to throw the World Series dated back to well before the later September setting that is usually offered. It started at the beginning of August. By then, the White Sox, with their replica of the powerful 1917 club in high gear, had moved into first place. It was at that time that Chick Gandil and Swede Risberg convinced Cicotte that he should enter into their scheme. Cicotte and Sleepy Bill Burns, the prime intermediary between the players and the gamblers, had their first conversation, and the pitcher also approached Buck Weaver to try to get him to join.[20] Thus, at this early date, the pitcher's motive could not have been Comiskey's denial of the opportunity to win thirty, since at this point he did not know whether he would approach that figure or what the owner would do if he did.

16. In Alexander Pope's words in "The Temple of Fame": "The flying rumours gather'd as they rolled, Scarce any tale was sooner heard than told; And all who told it added something new, And all who heard it made enlargements too." Alexander Pope, *Poetical Works,* ed. Herbert Davis, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 145.

17. "By piecing together disparate but seemingly related events a total picture may be constructed that is quite inaccurate." Shibutani, *Improvised News, 77.*

18. Eliot Asinof, *Eight Men Out* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1963), 20-22. On the other hand, later, in his *Bleeding between the Lines* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1979) 88, Asinof implies that, after all, it was 1919.

19. New *York Times,* September, 1917, passim. The *Times,* of course, printed the daily box scores, the rainouts, and the off days for all major league teams.

20. Sleepy Bill Burns' testimony, Black Sox trial, *New York Times,* July 22, 1921; Veeck, *The Hustler's Handbook, 284.* The White Sox made their second eastern trip in late July, early August, 1919.

Other considerations likewise point to the falsity of the Comiskey-Cicotte-*sans* thirty legend. As a minor point, as tight as the White Sox owner was, it is extremely improbable that he would ever have offered any player a $10,000 performance bonus. Also, the fact that the sum allegedly promised coincides exactly with the figure that Cicotte received from the gamblers, suggests that the bonus story may have had its origin in the gamblers' stipend.

More important, in his confession before the grand jury, Cicotte did not assert that denial of the opportunity to win thirty was his reason for "selling out." He gave as his motives worry over a recently contracted large farm mortgage, and the need for money for his family.[21] Some have offered the intimidating surroundings and the desire-in hopes of staying in the game-to avoid antagonizing Comiskey publicly as explaining why Cicotte spoke as he did. However, in a rare interview in old age, long after Comiskey had passed on, Cicotte made no reference to the thirty-wins story. He did not, like Gandil, try to deny that any games were thrown, nor did he blame anybody else. He simply reiterated the regrets as to his own conduct that he had expressed before the grand jury so long before. [22] The chief reason why 1919 looks as if it were the year is that in September there was a two-week hiatus in his pitching. On September 5 he won his 28th game. Not until the 19th did he pitch again-on which date his won his 29th and last victory. Is this not an indication that the White Sox owner intervened to stop him? No doubt many people came to this conclusion at the time, but in reality there were good reasons why Cicotte was sidetracked. First, the White Sox were enough in front not to worry, and Cicotte, who—as in 1917—had been pitching in and out of turn, needed a rest. Even so, could he not have been inserted long enough a couple of times to reach thirty? The negative answer to this question lies in the combination of the adverse pitching circumstances in which the White Sox found themselves for the World Series and the peculiar schedule conditions of the 1919 series. For the White Sox, starter Red Faber, bothered by a sore arm, could not pitch in the series.[23] This meant that they would face the Cincinnati Reds with only three starting pitchers. After Cicotte, Manager Kid Gleason had only the top-notch Claude Williams and the untried rookie Dickie Kerr.

To make matters worse, 1919 was the first year of the short-lived five rather than four victory requirement to win the World Series. With Chicago and Cincinnati not far apart, the schedule called for games every *day.* This meant that Gleason would have to use Cicotte, after a very strenuous season, in games one, four, and seven, with only two days' rest, and possibly even turn to him in some capacity in game nine, should it go that far. On September 21 the *New York Times* summed up Gleason's situation. "Because Gleason is figuring upon giving Cicotte so much work to do in the near future, he has been permitting the

21. Cicotte's testimony, New *York Times,* September 29, 1920.

22. Cicotte interview with Joe Falls, *The Sporting* News, November 15, 1965. See also Cicotte's obituary, Ibid., May 17, 1969. Gandil's version of the 1919 World Series is in *Sports Illustrated* 5 (September 17, 1956): 61-68, esp. 67-68.

23. Asinof, *Eight Men Out,* 115; *New York Times,* September 28, 1919.

pitcher to rest recently—Cicotte is the only big league pitcher in either big league who has a chance to register thirty victories this season, but Gleason is not worrying much about his individual record. He is looking ahead and is loathe to take any chances with his star." Also, ". . . the Kid is figuring on using his star in three games of the series and by starting him in the first game is the only way he could arrange to do so."[24] About a week later, the same paper reported that if the series should go the full length, Gleason might assign Cicotte four starts-the last one, presumably, on only one day's rest.[25] Given these circumstances, any manager would agree that Gleason had strong reasons for idling Cicotte for the stretch in September. Thus, the fortnight furlough that stalled his march to thirty is best explained in terms of the World Series situation *at the time,* not by the ex post facto tale of a Scrooge-like owner denying him the opportunity. Lastly, in point of fact, the pitcher did, in gratitude for his season-long hard work, receive one clear-cut opportunity to win thirty. On September 24 the White Sox stood ready to clinch the pennant, should they win that day. Cicotte, with both the clinching of the flag and his thirtieth win at stake, received the starting assignment. Unfortunately he had an off day, gave up five runs and 11 hits in seven innings, and retired for a pinch hitter. The White Sox rallied to win, but Kerr, in relief, gained credit for the pennant clincher.[26]

Such are the facts with regard to Cicotte's 1919 season. The legend that arose in connection with it shows that not every expression of the legendary represents a happy medium through which baseball's past is conveyed to the present. It would be better-but it is not likely-if this tale were to disappear from the game's accumulation of lore. The point is that it darkens excessively the reputation of a Hall of Fame owner who in today's climate in all probability could not be elected to baseball's sanctum.

What explains the legend's staying power? The most obvious reason is the superficial plausibility of the tale. More important, though on the whole the public supported Judge Landis' drastic act of permanently expelling the eight players tainted by the scandal, there yet remained a residue of sympathy for the most popular of the expellees. This was especially true of Joe Jackson and Buck Weaver. The once well-liked Cicotte benefitted to some extent as well.[27] While he had admittedly pitched deliberately poorly so as to lose two games, still, did not the supposed denial of the opportunity for him to win the magical 30 games provide some justification for his misdeed? At a deeper level, there probably was another factor, symptomatic of the times. By the early twentieth century the

24. New York Times. September 21, 1919. Gleason did in fact start Cicotte in three games, beginning with game one, as the *Times* indicated he would.

25. Ibid., September 29, 1919. Another consideration was that with Cicotte having pitched as often as he had, by September his arm had begun to feel the strain-Chicago *Daily News,* September 23, 1919. In his last start before his inactive two weeks, he won because the White Sox scored freely early in the game, but he gave up a rare six walks-Chicago *Tribune.* September 6, 1919.

26. Box score, New *York Times,* September 25, 1919. Cicotte also pitched a two-inning tuneup for the World Series, September 28, but with the Series scheduled to begin on October 1, Gleason withdrew him-New *York Times,* September 29, 1919.

27. New *York Times,* Aug. 4, 1921, editorial on the Landis expulsions; ibid., Aug. 3, 1921, description of cheers from the audience at the technical acquittal of the "Black Sox."

ruthless anti-social actions of many business tycoons was common knowledge. This had spawned the legend that all rich entrepreneurs were by definition bent on exploiting the common man.[28] Who better served from the sports world as the archetype of the "Robber Baron" than the White Sox owner? Was not his assumed refusal to allow his star pitcher to win 30 games a perfect illustration of a rich business mogul's heartlessness? And thus has the legend enjoyed a hearty life.

The second case is a good example of a familiar type, namely, what might be termed the poetic truth or appropriateness-of-things tale. That is, while the events did not occur as they are recounted, it would have been nice if they had. The memory is responsive to the affirmative and the positive, while the humdrum soon slips away. Is it not more fitting for a long-ago famous pitcher to have been unexpectedly "discovered" rather than to have been advanced through the broad interest that his work had created? The legend has to do with the turning point in the minor league years of Carl Hubbell.

As the tale runs, Dick Kinsella, John McGraw's chief scout, stumbled upon Hubbell by sheer chance. A delegate to the Democratic convention at Houston in 1928, he drifted off to watch a Houston-Beaumont Texas League game one afternoon, and there observed Hubbell pitch outstandingly well. The story usually includes the embellishment that Hubbell's pitching rival that day was Wild Bill Hallahan, later his opponent more than once when both became National League stars.[29] Hubbell provided his own imprimatur as guarantor of its accuracy: ". . . I want to establish something . . . right now. I've heard a lot of old ballplayers talking about their recollections and telling great stories and you know they're stretching things to the point of outright lying. But whatever I tell you that's it. . . . We got tied up in a close one and it was all even at l-l after nine innings. In about the 11th inning we scored and won, 2-l. Kinsella hurried to a phone and called John McGraw. He said, 'I saw another Art Nehf today.' . . . McGraw told him, 'Forget about the damn Convention. You get over there to Beaumont and find out about everything.' And the Giants bought me on July 16, 1928 . . ."[30]

How does this colorful tale compare to the actual facts? As for the origins of the yarn, it is easy to nail down the time frame. The Democratic Convention met in Houston that year, June 26 to 30.[31] However, because of inaccuracies in the story, the tale dates from no earlier than July 5. The reason is that during the convention days, Beaumont did not play Houston. It was rained out twice, played two doubleheaders against Ft. Worth, and one game against San Antonio.[32] Thus, not only did Kinsella not see Hubbell pitch in a game at Houston during the convention, but nowhere else either, since he did not appear

28. *Hand, American Folk Lore, 91.*

29. Alexander, *McGraw,* 285; Walter Langford, "How Carl Hubbell Reached the Majors," *Baseball History* 2 (Spring, 1987): 52-56. Langford's Hubbell interview is one of a series comprising his *Legends of Baseball* (South Bend, IN: Diamonds Communications, 1987) 37-51, esp. pp. 37-42.

30. Langford, *Legends, 40, 42.*

31. *Dallas Morning News,* June 24-30, 1928.

32. Ibid. The newspaper printed box scores of all Texas League games, rainouts, off days, etc.

in any of these games. Could McGraw's scout have arrived early and seen him in a game just before the convention started? This did not occur because Hubbell's last pitching assignment was not against Houston but Wichita Falls on Sunday, June 24. [33]

Could it be that the game came after the convention? This in fact was the case. On July 5, Hubbell, toiling for a no-name, last place club, pitched a brilliant three-hit game against first place Houston, which had six future and one former major leaguers in the line-up, winning 2-l in a regulation-length game. This in all probability was the game that Kinsella witnessed. Hubbell's opponent was not Hallahan, but Tex Carleton, the same pitcher who opposed him in his famous 18 inning l-0, no-walk shutout against the Cardinals five years later.[34] Thus the story's overstatements and inaccuracies include Hubbell's unearthing during the Houston convention when he was not even in the city, rather than much more prosaically later, an error in dates of about a week, the substitution of a better known for his lesser known opponent, and the recollection that the game went extra innings when it did not.

These errors are perhaps minor, but when connected with another, they become more important. In reality, Hubbell was by no means a lost figure pitching for a forgotten club. As the *Dallas Morning* News made plain, ". . . Scouts have been putting one Carl Hubbell under the microscope. It seems that the southpaw pitcher, whom Claude Robertson, manager of his club, lists as the best portside flipper he has ever caught, does not belong to Detroit as first reported but to the (Beaumont) Shippers. Scouts, finding this out have been hot on his trail."[35] Further: "There is no occasion for surprise over the sale of Pitcher Carl Hubbell to the New York Giants. That he would go up to some club was made obvious early in the season when this southpaw established himself as one of the leading hurlers in the loop with a last-place outfit."[36]

If Kinsella only became aware of Hubbell by accident as late as the end of June, he had to be the most dimwitted scout employed in the majors. John McGraw would not have tolerated such an imbecile for a moment. As is apparent, the only reason why some major league club had not gobbled up Hubbell long before July was that it was believed that he still belonged to Detroit. More than likely, the Democratic convention yarn worked in reverse: McGraw had gotten wind of Hubbell, ordered Kinsella to go to Texas to size him up, the scout then incidentally attended the convention, and afterwards made sure to watch the pitcher in action. Why else would he have stayed five days after the convention adjourned, if it had not been to make a personal appraisal of him? The reason why the Giants acquired him rather than some other team was not because of Kinsella's "discovery," but because McGraw paid Beaumont's steep $40,000 asking price for a class A league player.[37]

33. Ibid., June 25, 1928.
34. Box score in Ibid., July 6, 1928.
35. Ibid., July 13, 1928.
36. Ibid., July 14, 1928.
37. Sale price given in Hubbell's obituary, The *Sporting* News, December 5, 1988.

What can be said of the exaggerations in this instance? It is out of such inflations that legends arise. While individually the errors-except for the implication that Hubbell was an unknown-are not extraordinary, collectively they are necessary to the idea that the lefthander happened to pitch a fine game on the day that a scout chanced to be in the stands. This case is very handy because all the facts and all the overstatements are available, making it possible to compare the latter with the former, and gain a sense of the proportion of enlargement in the average legend.

What gives the Hubbell tale its staying power? One likely element is the thought of a scout on a busman's holiday chancing upon a future great pitcher makes for a pleasant fantasy. Everyone would like to be the miner who finally stumbles upon the vein of gold that no one recognized before him. Every avid fan imagines he could scout as well as the professionals, and would love to have the thrill of luckily spotting a great prospect before others latch onto him. A second factor is that Hubbell's subsequent leap to fame undoubtedly greatly enhanced the popularity of the story. He is remembered as by far the greatest screwball pitcher. In the recent past, Fernando Valenzuela gained acclaim as the second best practitioner of this difficult, arm-wrecking pitch, yet his accomplishments pale by comparison to Hubbell's feats. These included a no-hit game, an astounding 18 inning 1-0 walkless shutout, the striking out of five consecutive Hall of Fame hitters in an All Star game, the winning of 24 straight games across the 1936-37 seasons, and the chalking up of several memorable World Series victories.[38] That a legend should accompany the career of so brilliant a star is not at all surprising.

Finally, there was probably still another important element in boosting the Hubbell legend. From the later nineteenth century on, many gullible Americans were mesmerized by the Horatio Alger rags-to-riches dream. While it had begun to fade by World War I, there were traces of it still in the atmosphere during the free-wheeling, free-enterprise 1920s. The story of an unknown pitcher figuratively catapulted from the rags of a woebegone Minor League team to the riches of World Series fame constituted a perfect sports embodiment of the Alger fantasy.[39]

A different kind of legend focuses on the ludicrous or inspires laughter. Thus the third example is one of the most famous comic tales in the game's annals. It is the episode of the mutually colorful Boom-Boom Beck and Hack Wilson and the right field wall in long-gone Baker Bowl, Philadelphia.

In games in that park, with its very short right field fence, it was the right fielder's duty to field drives that rebounded off the fence, turn quickly, and throw to second, to limit the batter only to a single. It was not uncommon for this to happen several times in a game. As the yarn, with variations, is told, Walter Beck, a second-rate Brooklyn Dodgers pitcher, got pounded hard by the Phillies' batters through most of the game, resulting finally in Manager Casey

38. For a recent summary of Hubbell's career and baseball feats, see David L. Porter, ed., *Biographical Dictionary of American Sports, Baseball* (Westport, CT: Greenwood press, 1987), 267-268.

39. Hand, *American Folk Lore, 91.*

Stengel appearing in order to take him out. Disgusted, Beck turned, and in frustration, fired the ball up against the right field fence. Out in right field, the rotund Hack Wilson, robotized by all the smashes already hit against the fence, routinely rushed to the wall, fielded the rebound, and unleashed a perfect throw to second-with no batter or baserunner in sight.[40]

Since exaggeration is the essence of comedy, it is amusing to read a few variants of the tale. The first is by Tommy Holmes, long-time reporter of the defunct *Brooklyn Eagle,* who wrote an anecdotal history of the club: "Walter Beck was . . . known as 'Boom . . . Boom' because, when he pitched, the crack of the bat against the fence seemed like an echo of the ball against the bat. In Philadelphia Beck was in difficulties, and Stengel went out to the box. Walter begged to be allowed to pitch to 'just one more hitter. ' The hitter's drive cleared the fence. Stengel went out and again asked for the ball. Beck, furious at himself, whirled and threw it up against the tin facing of the high right field wall. . . .

"Out in right field stood Hack Wilson, his hands on his knees, his face toward the ground, enjoying his afternoon hangover. He heard the crash of the ball against the tin and galvanized into furious action. He whirled and retrieved the ball as it dropped and fired it hard and accurately into second base. 'A hell of a play, ' applauded Tony Cuccinello."[41]

In Robert Creamer's highly regarded *Stengel,* the tale comes out: "One day in Philadelphia in tiny old Baker Bowl . . . , the Dodger manager went out to the mound to remove the pitcher, . . . Walter Beck. Casey felt the Phils had been hitting Beck pretty hard. Beck didn't agree. In right field for the Dodgers that afternoon was Hack Wilson, who after several years of starring and drinking for the Cubs had been traded in 1932 to Brooklyn where after one good season he mostly concentrated on drinking. Hack was exhausted from chasing baseballs hit by the Phils off the tin fence behind him. . . . On the mound Beck argued with Stengel . . . 'Give me the ball,' said Stengel. 'No!' said the pitcher, and turned and flung it into right field, over Wilson's head and against the tin wall. The startled Wilson, his head down, heard it boom against the tin, thought it was another base hit and leaped into action. He raced back, fielded the ball off the wall, turned and threw a perfect strike into second base.[42]

Another account is by Glenn Wright, the classy shortstop of the later '20s and early '30s, in which we are to gather that he played an important intermediary role: ". . . They were knocking Walter Beck all over the lot, and I went in (as team captain) to take him out. But he . . . wouldn't give me the ball. Finally, he turned and fired it against the metal right field fence. Our right fielder, Hack Wilson, . . . heard the ball rattle off the fence, he hopped on it, and fired a strike

40. For a typical example of the fully furnished varnished legend, see Red Smith's column shortly after Hack Wilson's election to the Hall of Fame, New *York Times,* March 11, 1979.

41. Tommy Holmes, *Dodger Daze and Knights (New* York, 1953). 120.

42. Robert W. Creamer, *Stengel (New* York, 1984), 183.

to second base. . , . When he learned what had happened he was ready to murder Beck, I had to keep them apart.[43]

Wright is an especially imaginative witness, since he spent 1934, the year the episode occurred, playing for Kansas City in the American Association.[44] Apparently, a comic tale so enlivens a few people that later they invite themselves into it willy-nilly, whether they were anywhere in the vicinity or not.[45]

Whence comes this legendary farce? It can be readily traced to the second game of an obscure doubleheader at Baker Bowl on the Fourth of July, 1934, between the sixth place Dodgers and the seventh place Phillies. What actually happened, when contrasted with the later pumped-up versions, is a graphic example of what the passage of time and the propensity for inflationary story-telling can do.

Beck did in fact start the second game of the double-header, and Hack Wilson was in right field. However, instead of “Boom-Boom” staggering on through several innings of punishment, he was lifted in the very first inning. No home run was hit and no balls crashed against the right field wall. Beck’s trouble was that he gave up three walks, two wild pitches, and the Phillies managed several “. . . trick base hits that slithered between the infielders. . . .”[46] Thus Hack did not field a single ball off the wall while Beck pitched. Nor did Cuccinello congratulate him on the fine play he made, since the second baseman was the completely forgotten Glenn Chapman. Beck’s retirement, however, does resemble the later tales, and led the sportswriters to try their skills at off-the-cuff humor:

“In the first inning . . . Elmer the Great Beck couldn’t get anybody out. . . . Casey Stengel gave Beck the high sign to come into the bench.

> Mr. Beck looked around with a wild look in his eye for somebody to hit. He couldn’t see any specific target so he threw perhaps the best fast ball he has thrown this season up against the right field fence.[47]

> While the Dodgers were hopelessly beaten, the game at least had a moment of comedy. Walter Beck, who was knocked out in the first inning, became so annoyed when he was taken out that he threw the ball all the way to the right field fence.[48]

> Explosions, both verbal and of the July Fourth variety, were heard frequently. Walter Beck . . . supplied one when after pitching to eight men and allowing

43. Eugene Murdoch, “Glenn Wright, Last of the *1925* All Stars,” *Baseball Research Journal 8 (1979):* 112.

44. Glenn Wright’s complete career record printed in *Daguerreotypes, Hall of Fame Members and Other Immortals* (St. Louis: Charles C. Spink and Son, 1961), 248-249.

45. As another example, there is a well-known acerbic exchange between Manager Connie Mack and Al Simmons that concerned Howard Ehmke starting the first game of the 1929 World Series. See Connie Mack, “My Biggest Baseball Day” in *My Greatest Day in Baseball,* ed. John P. Carmichael (Chicago: Chicago *Daily News,* 1951) 25. In Mickey Cochrane, *The Fan’s Game* (1939; rep., Cleveland: Society for American Baseball Research, 1992) 100, the author credited himself with playing Simmons’ role. Other examples easily could be cited.

46. Brooklyn Eagle, July 5, 1934.

47. Ibid.

48. New York Herald Tribune, July 5, 1934.

> three runs in the first inning, he punctuated his withdrawal . . . by throwing the ball against the right field wall.[49]

The next day, Tommy Holmes in the *Brooklyn Eagle* continued the fun by reporting, "Elmer the Great believes that throwing the ball against the right field fence in Philadelphia on the Fourth released something that has been struggling inside him. . . . 'There was one fast ball I threw this year,' says he, 'which nobody hit.' "[50]

And where in all of this was Hack Wilson and his fabulous somnambulant throw to second? Lo and behold, neither Hack's name nor his feat appeared in either the *Brooklyn Eagle,* the *New York Times,* the *American,* the *Morning Telegraph,* or the *Evening Journal.*[51] In Tommy Holmes' case, while almost twenty years later he was able to recall so amusingly just what Hack had done, at the actual moment, he had absolutely nothing to say on the subject. What are we to infer? In light of Beck's removal in the first inning, it is highly unlikely that Wilson made any such throw in this game, and hence no mention of it. Possibly later in the game he did so, since the Phillies pounded out 11 runs and 16 hits, but it did not earn a comment at the time. More likely, in some earlier game in Baker Bowl he absentmindedly made such a throw, and, in order to make for a blossoming legend, it got attached to the Beck performance.

One incidental aspect of the old tale does seem to stem from this game. It is often said that Beck got his "Boom-Boom" nickname as the result of his bizarre feat on this occasion. It is likely this is true. The reporters who covered the doubleheader did not refer to him by his later famous nickname, but as either Walter, or "Elmer the Great," his then current moniker.

Since the Wilson-Beck legend has no deeper implications, whence comes its longevity? Probably one helpful note is that the principals happened to be models of two baseball stereotypes. One-Wilson-is the talented but alcoholic player who largely throws away his career in irresponsible but occasionally amusing behavior. The other is the hard-striving but incompetent moundsman—whose number is legion-of whom Beck, with his nonpareil nickname, is a classic example. Second, legends for laughs enjoy an advantageous survival potential, in that they lend themselves easily to comic additions and afterthoughts. In this case, Cuccinello's supposed role and Wilson's wrath look like typical later accretions. The comic embellishments add to the piquancy of the story, and deepen the imprint on the mind.

By far the most celebrated of baseball legends is that of Babe Ruth's forecasted World Series home run. So much is it a part of baseball lore that it approaches indispensability. Without it, the game would seem to lack a supremely appealing legendary achievement. With it, the mind becomes receptive to other legends.

So oft-told is the story that it is recapitualted only by way of comparison in its

49. *New York Times,* July 5, 1934.
50. *Brooklyn Eagle,* July 6, 1934.
51. The aforesaid newspapers, July 5, 6, 1934.

characteristics with the previous ones. The legend has it that in the third game of the 1932 World Series, Ruth, in one of his times at bat, gesticulated toward the fence, then immediately launched a home run over the barrier. Before a huge audience, should he fail, and with chances in terms of his home run frequency per times at bat only 1: 11.9, he had performed an amazing feat.

Or had he? Ever since, there has been an ongoing debate as to whether the gesture was rather to indicate the ball-strike count, not to predict a home run. Most people view what followed as stereotypically legendary, on the assumption that he had not actually forecast the home run.

Overall the evidence leans toward upholding the authenticity of the event. The accounts of Ruth and opposing pitcher Charley Root and their respective teammates can be set aside, on the grounds of evident partisanship.[52] Beyond this, however, the data tends toward the likelihood that by pointing Ruth did indeed forecast his home run. In the still extant radio broadcast of Ted Husing, the announcer made reference to Ruth having predicted his home run even as he described him circling the bases.[53] The very next day-not, as in legendary fashion, some, or even a long, time afterward-the New *York* Times referred to Ruth's extraordinary act in the description of the game.[54] Very recently, a long dormant film sequence of Ruth's time-at-bat has surfaced, in which the slugger is seen as pointing repeatedly outward. This makes less likely the possibility that he was indicating only the ball-strike count.[55] Incidentally, on at least two earlier occasions Ruth had predicted home runs-one in a World Series—suggesting that the feat wasn't that improbable—for him.[56]

It helps in identifying different types of the legendary to compare the Ruth episode with the preceding tales. In origins the first three have a conveniently murky-though identifiable-starting point, thereby inviting hard-to-contradict additions and alterations, and eventually a legendary gloss. On the other hand, the Ruth story originated in a very specific and well-covered event-a World Series game. This makes it easy to ascertain every detail and hard for expansion to take place. With regard to the characteristic of enlargement, while this is great in the Cicotte and Beck-Wilson tales, and important in the Hubbell one, it is not the dominant note in the Ruth case. Thus, unlike the other three, the central incident, while probably not undiluted fact, consists of more authentic deed than legend.

Yet paradoxically the amount of doubt concerning the circumstances of the home run is probably greater than that which exists with regard to any of the earlier trio. What with Ruth himself being a figure on a legendary scale, the assumption is that the gestured home run is a story too good to be true, so it

52. For Root's version, it is reprinted in Coffin, *The Old Ball Game,* 33. Interestingly, Coffin, who firmly believes Ruth's act is sheer legend, printed Root's debunking account, but chose not to print Ruth's version. For it, see "Ruth's Greatest Baseball Day," in Carmichael, ed., *My Greatest Day in Baseball,* 187, wherein Ruth said he pointed broadly at the fence, but not specifically where he then hit the home run.

53. Husing's description of Ruth's home run survives as one of the bands comprising the record, "Great Moments in Cub Baseball" (Chicago: Major Official Publications, 1971).

54. *New York Times,* October 2, 1932.

55. Don Bell, "Did He Really Call His Shot?" *The National Pastime 9* (1990): 15-16.

56. Creamer, *Babe,* 312-313.

must be legendary. Moreover, the extent of the disbelief has increased with time.[57] Of course, part of the reason is the exceptional familiarity of the Ruth home run, enabling any curious person easily to consult the appropriate newspapers, and form his or her own conclusion. But the insistent doubts probably originate in a different source. They are an expression of the widespread antinominalism of the times. One of the facets is a tendency to denigrate once admired personalities or events as somehow fraudulent.

Despite the doubters, the Ruth legend-as the 1992 movie, *The Babe* demonstrates-marches blithely on. In Ruth's case, there is no need to search out the reasons why the legend has lived on, because his life and career make it obvious. If Hubbell's accomplishments help to account for the survival of the legend about his early pitching days, the same is true on a much larger scale of Ruth, because his achievements as a slugger far surpassed even those of the left-handed pitcher. Ruth's superlative playing skills-which, incidentally, included pitching outstandingly in his early years-made him the nation's premier sports hero of his time. Eventually his uninhibited personal life and fabled playing abilities made him into a legendary figure of Gargantuan or Bunyanesque proportions. Like Enrico Caruso, his contemporary in another entertainment field, Ruth ultimately transcended his own time, and has become a household name at least for the duration of the century.[58] The skeptics, in casting their doubts on the authenticity of the famous four-bagger, are in a sense missing the point, for Ruth himself is the heart of the legend more than the home run.

III.

In light of the fundamental characteristics of baseball's legends, what tentative generalizations might be drawn as to why in some people the mind's wistful dimension is drawn to the oversized tales? First, it seems likely that the typical magnification is for the mind not a disturbance but an attraction. Life's petty pace is relieved by the occasional opportunity for the mnemonic faculty to recall and to savor a largely fanciful tale or recollection from long ago. Past and present are thereby kept connected, with the former serving in a bolstering capacity. For another reason as well, the mind may respond favorably to enlargement. It tends to share Victor Hugo's feeling that "History has its truth; Legend has hers."[59] That is, the assumption that there is a poetic truth underlying most legends supersedes such flaws of hyperbole as they contain. That there was once at least a romantic truth makes more palatable the few dubious truths of the present. Again, the maintenance of the interrelationship of the once-was and the is-now is enhanced. Second and similarly, most legends' uncertainty of provenance is not a vexation to the mind, but a comfort. To the memory, the

57. John Drebinger, who reported the game for the New York *Times,* in recalling it 25 years later-September 28, 1957—commented that "every so often" there were a few who doubted the feat, but they were the type who believed the "Battle of Bull Run was a fix." Their numbers have grown since.

58. For Ruth's personality, baseball career, and achievements, see among numerous biographies, Creamer, *Babe.*

59. Victor Hugo, *Ninety* Three (London: Nelson and Sons, English tr., n.d.), Part II, Book 4, p. 212.

unspecificity of the tale from bygone times induces a faint, pleasant melancholy, thereby soothing and relaxing the mind, however briefly. Thus in yet another way the person's ability to cope with the present has been helped by escape into a past of legends attractive to him.[60]

Given the attraction of legends to some of the sports breed, baseball is fortunate in having spawned a lush variety. Thereby she bears out Edmund Burke's observation that an institution-family, club, nation, or sport-needs "... a pedigree and illustrious ancestors ..., its gallery of portaits, its monumental inscriptions ...,"—and its legends.[61] Through the statistics, histories, and Hall of Fame, baseball fulfills the stipulations of pedigree and portrait gallery. As for the distinguished forebears, the principals in the stories, in an inflated, somewhat fanciful, occasionally even comic, way, are the legendary equivalents. Baseball's custodians and her more ardent fans would do well to maintain the legends in good health. So wispy a flower might easily show signs of wilting-possibly already has, in the paucity now of truly fresh blossoms. Nature dictates that all things are transitory, so eventually the day will come when the game itself departs. Fending that calamity, the legends should not be neglected, lest they become an early symptom of a deeper malady.

60. See Davis, Yearning *for* Yesterday, VII, 14, 15, 21. For a suggestion of the same function served in nostalgia, as explored from a psychoanalytical standpoint, see Vandor Fordor, "Varieties of Nostalgia," Psychoanalytic *Review 37* (1950): 35.

61. Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution, 29.*