# DIVIDED LOYALTIES: EARLY MEMORIES OF CHICAGO BASEBALL

Some things are supposed to be unnatural, indefensible, maybe even impossible. But I'm living proof that a person can be a fan of both the Cubs and the White Sox. This is my confession and explanation.

Until 1957, when I was eleven, my parents and I lived in Hyde Park. For most of that time, we were within easy walking distance of a great-aunt and uncle who were more like a third set of grandparents. Their home was the East End Park apartment hotel at the corner of 53rd and Hyde Park Blvd.—at the northwest corner, to be precise. That's important because at the southwest corner was the Del Prado, where visiting teams stayed when they came to Chicago to play the Sox.

Naturally, some of us haunted that corner, waiting for the players to come out to board the bus that would take them to Comiskey Park, and hoping that they wouldn't ignore our plaintive requests for "just one autograph, please!"

In the corner of the East End Park, at street level, was O'Connell's Restaurant, which made decent burgers and served a cheesecake to die for. One family legend has it that some of us were sitting there one day, with me looking out the window and across to the Del Prado, when Ted Williams began to unfold himself from the rear seat of a taxi. As the story goes, I was through the revolving door of the restaurant and half-way across the street, with autograph book in hand, before my hamburger hit my plate. And I got him! It was a really good "get," but not my best ever. My best "get" was the day the damned Yankees were in town, and I got Mickey Mantle, Yogi Berra, and Bill Dickey—and all on the same day, and all on the same page. That probably was the happiest day of my life up to that point, though I did my best to act nonchalant, even years before I knew what the word meant.

Even so, the visiting teams were only a sideshow. The Center of the Universe for a young Sox fan was (away from the ballpark itself, of course) the Piccadilly apartment hotel, only about two blocks from our apartment, where many of the Sox lived during the season. Remember that we're talking about the early to mid-50s, light-years before the era of million dollar contracts for pedestrian ballplayers. (I recall being in the front bench seat of a car one evening—maybe in 1956, when I was all of ten years old and certain that I knew everything there was to know about my team—sandwiched between my Dad and our family friend, Dave, and we probably were on our way to Comiskey because Dad and Dave were talking baseball, which is something my Dad didn't do very often. Somehow the conversation turned to the merits of Sammy Esposito, a useful but limited utility infielder. Dave dismissed him out of hand, "Oh, he's just a pisher," prompting me to chirp in, "No he's not! He's a third baseman!")

There they were, every time the Sox played at home, either getting on the bus before the game or getting off it on their way home, just waiting to be "got." And "got" they were, but that didn't stop some of us from coming back, day after day after day. Why? Because they became more than Major League ballplayers and more than members of the only team in the country that any sane kid would support. They became guys we knew, guys who sometimes had time to talk to a kid while they were standing outside the "Pic," and guys who sometimes even remembered your name: not just "How's things, kid?", but "How ya doin', Stan?" Wow!

Sometimes some of them—I think of Jim Busby in particular—even allowed me to walk down the street with him when he went shopping and even to help carry some of his grocery bags back to the "Pic." He only hit .243 for the Sox in 1955, but he was a hero to me! Unlike football players, you can see the faces of baseball players on the field. They become recognizable, but how many of them are you sure you'd know out of uniform? I could recognize Harry Dorish, Morrie Martin, Saul Rogovin, Vito Valentinetti, or even Matt Batts (has a catcher ever had a better name?) as easily as Walt Dropo, George Kell, Sherm Lollar, or Ron Jackson, the towering rookie phenom at first base who just couldn't miss greatness, but did. I don't recall seeing Paul Richards or Marty Marion, the Sox managers during most of those years (Al Lopez arrived in 1957), but I do remember some of the coaches such as Don Gutteridge, Luman Harris, and the pitching coach, Ray Berres. In fact, I picture them sitting at a table in the "Pic's" restaurant, making me wonder what on earth I was doing there.

Some of the Sox were gracious, always with time for a few words. Mike Fornieles was among them, and so was Sandy Consuegra. Others enjoyed giving us a hard time. For what must have been a full week though it seemed like forever, Virgil Trucks refused to sign my autograph book, claiming that he'd already signed it once and once was enough. I'm sure he was just ragging me, but it wasn't until he saw that I was on the verge of tears that he gave up his little game. I think I always knew that he was just having some fun with me but, much as I regret saying it, I never did quite forgive him.

Not all the Sox lived there. I don't think that Nellie Fox did, and he was one of my very favorites. And Jungle Jim Rivera didn't live there either, although he sometimes came around in his cream-colored Cadillac convertible. Nor Minnie Minoso, another of my heroes. It never occurred to me at the time, of course, to wonder if any of the admittedly very few Negroes (a perfectly polite word at the time) on the team, including Larry Doby for a few years, lived there. I remember Dick Donovan walking east on 51st Street toward the "Pic", so he probably lived somewhere in that direction.

And then there was Chico: Chico Carrasquel, the fine Venezuelan ballplayer who preceded Little Looie (Aparicio) at shortstop. I never met Chico (or Looie, for that matter), but he remains sharp in my memory because of my grandmother, who knew and cared as much about baseball as Ayatollah Khomeini. She had her own apartment in our building, and there was a long and narrow courtyard that separated it from the apartment hotel immediately next

door. Well, there came a time when the loud parties in the neighboring building became too much to bear for even a soul as patient and forgiving as my grandmother. So she took her complaint to the building manager, who told her that the parties were taking place in the apartment of—you guessed it—Chico Carrasquel of the White Sox. She never complained again, and I never loved her more.

Then the unthinkable happened. We moved to the far North Side of the city. It was a different world, the world of the Cubs. But my South Side loyalties held firm, at least for the first few years, and gave me two of my most vivid memories of the Sox.

One, of course, was the night the Sox clinched the pennant in 1959. (We don't talk about the World Series that followed, thank you very much. Sure, Ted Kluszewski's two homers in our lopsided win in Game 1 led the city to rename a short street near Comiskey Park as Big Klu Drive, but that did little to ease the pain inflicted by the games that followed.) The Sox played the Indians in Cleveland, and I can picture two moments in that game as clearly today as I could then. The first was Al Smith of the Sox but formerly of the Indians cutting down Minnie Minoso, then of the Indians but formerly of the Sox, at home plate. (Minnie was a Sox regular from 1952 through 1961, except for 1958-1959 when he was with the Indians. What a shame he was on the wrong side in 1959 and missed history.) And the second was Gerry Staley coming in to pitch in the ninth inning with the bases loaded and the game on the line, throwing one pitch, and inducing Vic Power to ground into the double play that ended the game and gave us the pennant. Naturally enough, Chicago's fire commissioner responded by ordering the city's air raid sirens to be set off. Some people evidently panicked. But I figured that if they didn't know what had just happened, they had no one to blame but themselves.

I think you had to live on the South Side during the 50s to understand just how painful it was to be a Sox fan during those years. It wasn't that the Sox teams were lousy. They just weren't good enough, never good enough until that magical year of 1959. For five straight seasons—1952, 1953, 1954, 1955, and 1956—we finished third, and then we climbed to second (oh so close!) in 1957 and 1958. Is it any wonder that so many of us developed such a visceral dislike for the Yankees, even though that was years before George Steinbrenner gave the Yankees a face we could love to hate? When I thought of Chicago as "the second city" during the '50s, it had nothing to do with the city's population.

The second memory takes me back about 18 months before that historic night in Cleveland to an evening when my father returned home from work with a pair of box seat tickets to the 1958 Opening Day game at Comiskey. Back then, of course, it was a day game during the work week so Dad couldn't attend because he had to work for a living. But Mom, who cared little for baseball but a great deal for me, announced that she and I would go together.

By then, we had moved to the North Side so it was a long trip to Comiskey on public transportation. Naturally, we got a very early start because I wanted to savor every minute of the

experience. Not just Opening Day, but box seats! Along the way, we somehow began chatting with a sports reporter for the Sun-Times who had guessed where we were going. Maybe his insight had something to do with the Jim Piersall model fielder's mitt that I already was wearing. We had a pleasant enough conversation, though it was no longer on our minds after we'd been shown to our amazingly good seats just behind the White Sox dugout on the third base side of the field.

I was standing there, excitedly watching the fielding and batting practice, when the reporter caught my eye and beckoned me to join him and two other boys my age where they were standing at the edge of the field. And then he called over Billy Pierce. Yikes, Billy Pierce! Just the finest pitcher the Sox had, and coming off of the two twenty-win seasons of his career. There we three boys stood, looking like dopes as Billy pretended to sign a ball for us and a Sun-Times photographer immortalized the scene.

Thinking nothing more of it, I walked to school the next morning with a note from my mother that said only, "Please excuse Stan from school yesterday." No explanation, no justification, no lie. As I soon discovered, however, no explanation was needed because it seemed to me that every teacher at Daniel Boone school was holding a copy of the morning's Sun-Times which always began its sports section on the back page of the tabloid. There in all its glory was that photograph. But there was more. In the accompanying article, our friendly reporter had included my name, the name of my school, and a quotation from Mom to the effect that it was the civic duty of every Sox fan to attend the opening day game. (She somehow failed to mention that this was the first time we'd done our "civic duty.")

Put your thumb and index finger as close together as you can without allowing them to touch, and the space between them is just how close I came to being suspended just months before I was scheduled to graduate and move on to the rarified atmosphere of high school. I've been leery about what I say to reporters ever since.

Ironically, it was precisely that transition from elementary school to high school that led me to the Cubs, something that would have been unimaginable only months before.

During that summer of 1958, I was only 12 years old and too young for a summer job. So rather than allowing me to do nothing, which I've always done quite well, my parents decided that I should spend my mornings at summer school, getting a head start on high school biology. Being an obedient son, every weekday morning for what seemed like eternity I took a bus to Sullivan high school that, as fate would have it, is located just two blocks from Clark St., which proceeds to run south and then southeast straight to Wrigley Field. I was doomed!

Every few days, one or more friends and I would dash from school to Clark St. and hop on a bus that got us to Wrigley before the first pitch. With our cardboard score cards in hand, we'd then run to the stairs that brought each team down to the field from its dressing room located above and on the other side of the ballpark's indoor concourse. To protect the players,

the stairs were fenced in, but during their short walk from the bottom of the stairs to what must have been the rear entrance to their dugout, they had to pass a gauntlet of kids like me, thrusting our score cards over or through the fence that separated us, and pleading, cajoling, begging for autographs: "Just one, pleeeeze!"

So my autograph books for the Sox and their American League rivals soon had to share pride of place with my growing stack of carefully protected—rolled but never folded—Cubs' score cards festooned with the signatures of Cubbies and their National League opponents. (The Cubs usually were so bad that it would do them too much credit to call the visiting teams their "rivals.") We also could wait around after the game, especially to "get" visiting players when they emerged from the ballpark to catch a team bus that was waiting for them at the curb. If a player wasn't among the very last to leave his clubhouse, he faced the choice of stopping for us or hurrying straight onto the bus to a chorus of our boos and catcalls.

After most Cubs' games, however, we were pre-occupied with a much more serious matter: getting a free pass for the next game.

The wood seats at Wrigley became increasingly hard and uncomfortable as day games wore on. So for the pleasure of their patrons' posteriors, the Cubs rented, for 15 cents each as I recall, tan canvas seat cushions. Well, it was one thing for fans to carry their rented cushions to their seats before the game, but it was quite another to expect them to carry the cushions back beneath the stands and turn them in after the game. As a result, the stands at Wrigley after a game looked a bit like that Boston skyscraper that had many of its green-tinted windows pop out and replaced by plywood. Wrigley was a sea of green seats with scattered patches of tan.

Instead of using their own paid staff to retrieve the seat cushions, someone in the infamously cheap Wrigley organization had a brainstorm. Any kid who collected some number of cushions (maybe it was 10 or 15, or however many an adolescent boy could be expected to carry) and brought them down to the storage room beneath the third base stands would be handed a yellow slip of paper that gave him free admission to the game on _____, with the blank filled in with the date of the next home game. To stamp the date on our free passes, a Cubs' employee used the kind of rubber stamp that has three tracks like miniature versions of tank tracks: one for the month, one for the date, and one for the year. After each game, the cushion maven would rotate one or more of the tracks until the correct month, date and year were aligned on the bottom of the stamp, and then he'd go to work with his inkpad and pad of passes.

This meant that, in theory, we had to pay admission for our first game of the season, and then we could come to every other home game for free, simply by diligently scouring the stands for cushions and, if necessary, scaring off younger and smaller kids who had their eyes on the same cushions my pals and I were after. It was a dog eat dog world, after all, when free baseball tickets were at stake. The difficulty, though, was that we couldn't attend every game, so we solved that little problem by becoming expert forgers. (One of my chief partners in crime now is

a senior government attorney somewhere in our great land, but I shall protect his identity at all costs.)

If we used a high-quality eraser, rubbing it very gently over as much of the date as we needed to change, and if we then used a sufficiently blunt pencil to draw in the date of the next game we could attend, our masterpieces could withstand the glance our passes received as we charged breathlessly (and intentionally, of course) through the Wrigley Field turnstiles. And so in the course of one summer, I saw many more Cubs games than I'd seen White Sox games during my short life.

Sometimes the games weren't very exciting because there wasn't much at stake, no tense pennant races in which the fate of the Cubs' season rested on the outcome of every game. In fact, it seemed to me that whenever I was at Wrigley, Ernie Banks was much more likely to hit a pop-up than a homer and the starting pitcher every time seemed to be Bob Anderson, who was a journeyman with a losing lifetime record. But then there was the day that two balls were in play at the same time.

It was June 30, 1959, and the Cubs were playing the Cardinals, with Bob Anderson on the mound (naturally). On a three-ball count, Anderson's pitch to Stan Musial got past Sammy Taylor, the Cubs' catcher, and rolled to the backstop. But instead of racing back to pick up the ball, Taylor, now joined by Anderson, remained at home plate to argue with the umpire that Musial actually had fouled tipped the pitch. Meanwhile, Musial was trotting down to first when, perhaps alerted by his first-base coach, he realized what was going on, rounded first, and took off for second.

At that moment, and for some inexplicable reason, the umpire handed a new ball to either Anderson or Taylor, who noticed Musial on his way to second and attempted to throw him out. Instead, the ball sailed over the head of the young second baseman, Tony Taylor (no relation to Sammy). Musial, seeing a ball on its way into center field and having no reason to doubt that it was the game ball, set off for third. Meanwhile, though, the Cubs' third baseman, that savvy veteran, Alvin Dark, had come charging to the backstop behind home and picked up the original ball, having retrieved it, according to one report, from the estimable Pat Pieper, for 59 years the Cubs' public address announcer. With the game ball now in hand, Dark turned and gunned it to Ernie Banks, who tagged an astonished and perplexed Musial somewhere between second and third. Since Banks held the ball that Anderson had pitched, the umpire was right in calling Musial out, unless Pat Pieper actually had touched the ball, which should have been something akin to fan interference.

At the time, I was a careful scorer of the games I attended, trying to account for every event on the field with letters, numbers, little lines, and diamonds. So perhaps you can imagine why I missed most of the action during the next inning as I pondered how to capture what I'd just witnessed with a scoring system that finally had met a situation with which it just couldn't

cope. (If this whole episode seems too implausible to be true, I invite you to listen to Jack Brickhouse's live play-by-play account at http://www.justonebadcentury.com/audio/Two_balls_at_same_time.mp3.)

Fifty years have passed since that infamous day, and I haven't attended more than a handful of Sox or Cubs games since then. After I left Chicago in 1966, all the evidence of my early career as a baseball fan, all my autograph books and autographed scorecards, disappeared, along with my 45 rpm records and the collection of baseball cards on which I could have retired many years earlier, when my parents moved from one apartment to another and I wasn't there to protect the greatest treasure trove since the discovery of King Tut's tomb. And also since then, my visits to Chicago during baseball season have been few and far between, and on those visits it's been easier to get to Wrigley Field than to what always will be Comiskey Park, naming rights be damned and even if the original was torn down years ago. But I've followed the fortunes of both teams and watched them on TV when I could, and to this day I couldn't tell you in all honesty which of them lies closest to my heart.

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