

"GABBY" STREET
HOPKINSVILLE'S INITIAL GIFT TO
MAJOR LEAGUE BASEBALL

a paper presented to the
Athenaeum Society

Dr. Thomas L. Riley
Hopkinsville, Kentucky
October 7, 1976

Few, indeed, in this room would not recognize the names of Pete Rose, Joe DiMaggio, Johnny VanderMeer, Bob Feller, or an earlier generation of Babe Ruth, Waite Hoydt, Ty Cobb, Cy Young, Honus Wagner, or Rogers Hornsby. Many of you would know the team, the position, and have a fair idea of the batting average or won-loss record to these baseball immortals. No team sport has ever captured the interest of Americans as has baseball.

To be sure, Ohio State's football team played last week before the usual 100,000 fans in Columbus and the Superbowl may draw a like number, but baseball will draw interest and participation and attendance--equal to all other organized sports combined.

Baseball had its start in rural America in the years just before the Civil War. By the turn of the century, it was a rare small town that was not fielding a team. Organized and scheduled league play soon followed. Some of the leagues were to achieve status as minor leagues of various classification thus the American Association and the Pacific Coast Leagues were of the next category, followed by the Texas League and the 3I League and a host of others. The starting point, however, for thousands of aspiring young ball players who dreamed of major league stardom--and the end of the road for hundreds on their way down from the majors--was the lowest league of them all--the class D's. Organized in 1903-in Hopkinsville--was the Kitty League and the stories accompanying the teams and the players of the old class D League are as numerous as were the players.

This paper relates to one of these early Hopkinsville players who went on to achieve fame in later years in and out of the Majors. His name: Charles Evard

(Gabby) Street.

Baseball had its beginning in the late 1830's when Abner Doubleday supposedly laid out a crude diamond for the locals at little upstate Cooperstown, New York. A competitive team game, a first for Americans. Doubleday-who was to become a Union Army general-along with many others-further popularized the game as troops of both sides during the Civil War found an inexpensive, easily improvised and competitive diversion from battle, bottle and boredom. The story is often told of General Grant taking time out during the Wilderness campaign to watch and root for a team from an Illinois Regiment in a game against a team from Massachusetts. There's a fabled yarn that the committee appointed to notify Abraham Lincoln of his nomination as Republican candidate for the presidency found him playing baseball with a few cronies on a Springfield sandlot. In some versions, it is even told the future President kept the committee waiting while he took a final turn at bat, before accepting their message. In any event, young men were playing the game in cow pastures and sandlots nation-wide when the smoke of the War cleared.

In 1869, the first acknowledged professional club came into existence. Harry Wright, a great player of his time, teamed up with a financial angel, A. B. Champion, a Cincinnati lawyer, to organize the Cincinnati Red Stockings. He arranged a schedule of "championship" games that took the team from the East Coast to the Mississippi and back again. It was a mixed bag. The team played 57 games, winning 56 and tying one. Over the 12,000 miles they played before 280,000 paid customers. Financially, however, they lost their high collared shirts.

This tour with all the interest generated did provide a side benefit for the sport. Newspapers in various cities assigned reporters to cover the games. Inning

by inning results were relayed by teletype to interested cities throughout the East and Midwest. Sports reporting began, baseball had indeed become newsworthy.

The professional idea caught on. In the next ten years professional clubs sprang up in profusion. There was no organization or central control; there was proselyting, gambling, umpire baiting, bribery, and thrown games. Even as the sport became discredited as professional entertainment, its popularity as a sandlot game grew. Professional baseball's trials and errors of the next decade resulted in a meeting of the leaders and investors in 1876, out of which grew the National League of Professional Baseball Clubs, Inc. Represented were eight clubs: Chicago, Boston, Cincinnati, New York, Philadelphia, St. Louis, Hartford, and Louisville.

The battles over franchises, Sunday baseball, the reserve clause, selling beer in the parks, player acquisition and control, the birth of a junior circuit--the American League--were to be hammered out in the 80's and 90's. These were truly the days of the iron men of baseball: Pop Ansen, for example, won 20 consecutive games, including two doubleheaders, he was the only pitcher on the team. Short-stops and first basemen--and anyone else--frequently took over the pitching chores when injuries forced a pitcher to the sidelines. Overhand pitching came into use in 1881. The pitching mound was moved from 45 to 60 1/2 feet from the plate shortly thereafter. The catcher, who had been stationed 15 feet away, moved in behind the batter. Instead of seven balls and four strikes allowed each batter, the rule of four balls and three strikes came into existence. Gloves and protective masks came into use.

The period had its turbulence--Cincinnati was expelled from the league in 1881 for playing games on Sunday and, a calamity for the Germans in Rhineland,

for selling beer. Latham, a particularly pugnacious St. Louis Browns player, was scheduled for 20 post season fights, including five with his own teammates. Billy Sunday was terrorizing the league with his base stealing abilities. A Louisville outfielder, Weaver, celebrated the 4th of July 1893 by whipping out a revolver and placing five shots in a fly ball before catching it.

There were those who did not adore the stars and few were more adamant than the pompous lawyer, Robert Todd Lincoln, the only surviving son of the martyred President. Incensed over his daughter's marriage to a Chicago pitcher, Lincoln denounced his unwanted son-in-law as a "baseball buffoon." The denunciation prompted Warren Beckwith to enlist for service in the Spanish-American War, hoping to raise his father-in-law's opinion of him. Apparently it didn't. The marriage soon ended in divorce.

Professional baseball did achieve maturity during the period and with a new century came new professionalism and a new optimism. Major and minor league baseball entered its golden age. In 1903 the Kitty League appeared on the scene.

KIT League

Joe Dorris wrote in the July 2, 1974 New Era that: "if it is true a cat has nine lives, somebody owes the Kitty four. The Kitty in this case is the old Kitty League, the legendary class D professional baseball league which flourished on and off for a half century. In its "on" flourishes, the Kitty became probably the best known loop of lower classification in the history of baseball. Vaudeville comedians in New York and Chicago who may never have been south of Indianapolis would quip, 'You couldn't get by with that even in the Kitty League'.

The statement was an exaggeration. Whatever the comedians were talking about, you could have gotten by with it in the Kitty."

The Kitty League was composed of small cities and towns in Kentucky Indiana, Illinois and Tennessee thus the name KIT, and in a few years Kitty. "Good baseball, or at least several notches above semi-pro and sandlot, was played in the Kitty, but by its very nature, the League collected the youngsters on their way up and the oldsters on their way down. All seemed to insist on doing their own thing. Playing conditions, travel arrangements, the crowds, all made for an interesting baseball league. Profits being what they were, players often helped take up tickets, swept out the stands, anything. Street used to tell of taking a fly spray can of citronella through the stands and for 5¢ spraying, as a mosquito preventative, anyone who had the price.

Hopkinsville never won many pennants in the Kitty and its clubs rarely made money. But Hopkinsville was somewhat the backbone of the old Class D Circuit. Two of the three presidents of the League and certainly the League's strongest supporters, Dr. Frank Bassett and Shelby Peace, were from Hopkinsville. Without the support of these two men, the League would not have had the years and the five lives that it did manage. Stories of the Kitty and its players are legion: the second baseman who fielded a ground ball then threw it at a rabbit, who chose at that moment to scurry across the infield, instead of the first baseman; the pop foul that hit a sparrow on the fly; the line drive that became entangled in a flock of sheep grazing in left field; the center fielder who was chased to the dugout by snakes in the tall outfield grass; the fielder attempting a long fly ball who then crashed into a fence, through it and into Little River; and of another long fly that was impaled on a protruding nail, high on the right field fence. It was a colorful and a zany league and Hopkinsville was richer for

having been a part of it.

The opening for the new KIT League, May 22, 1903, was a perfect day for baseball in Hopkinsville. The League this initial year was comprised of Owensboro, Cairo, Henderson, Hopkinsville, Clarksville, Paducah, Vincennes, and Jackson.

The Kentucky New Era described the opening day festivities thusly: "The teams headed by a band and accompanied by various officials in carriages paraded through the business section of the town and to the park. Here the teams indulged in practice after which Mayor Powell stepped into the pitcher's box and was handed a new ball. Chief of Police Henry donned the catcher's mitt, mask and breast protector and Capt. Turner of the Fire Dept. stepped to the plate gripping a bat which had been manufactured specially for this game. The Mayor struck an attitude, went through a series of movements and sent the sphere squarely across the plate where Capt. Turner's bat met it and knocked a long foul down the third base line.

Hopkinsville then took the field and went to their positions in a trot, making a striking picture in their new uniforms."

The action on the field was to foreshadow many games in the years to come-- again as described by a not unbiased Hopkinsville reporter for example,

Third Inning

"In this inning, Umpire Freund made two decisions which robbed Hopkinsville of at least one score. Mullen hit to right field and was clearly safe at 1st but was called out. Farris fanned. Edwards got his base on balls, Mullen taking his place at 1st as runner.

Mullen stole 2nd and 3rd and went home on a passed ball reaching the bag easily but was again called out."

Box score for this first League game for the Hopkinsville "Moguls"

Hopkinsville: 2 runs, 8 hits, 1 error

Henderson: 0 runs, 4 hits, 5 errors

The winning Hopkinsville battery: Edwards, pitching and Street, catcher

Hopkinsville's first games were played at Athletic Park near the present intersection of 18th and Walnut Streets. The L&N Railroad cut had not been made at this time. The second Hopkinsville baseball field, Mercer Park, was off West 9th Street on the site of the present Farm Bureau Building, Kentucky Park, off Means Avenue, was the location of the third and last home.

Hopkinsville's catcher in this initial year's opening day game was Charles Evard (Gabby) Street who had been lured from his home in Huntsville, Alabama to attend South Kentucky College. Dr. Bassett was not unaware of the young man's baseball talents and soon Gabby was to be found practicing with the Hopkinsville team after classes. He found professional baseball to his liking and an academic dropout was soon to be registered by South Kentucky. Gabby's life for the next 47 years was one baseball campaign after another laid end to end from 1903 to 1950. The only interlude was 1918 when he served in World War I with a chemical division in France. It was there that he got another nickname, "The Old Sarge".

Street moved up to Terre Haute for the beginning of the 1904 season and at mid-season he was beckoned on to the Majors with Cincinnati his first stop. During the next season, 1905, he was involved in a trade with Boston. The 1906 and 1907 season saw him go back to the minors with San Francisco of the Pacific Coast League.

Fortune, and the need for an experienced catcher for the star Walter Johnson, brought Street back to the Majors in 1908 with the Washington Nationals.

Walter Johnson was on his way to becoming one of baseball's all-time greats. The "Big Train" as he was called, owned what had to be the fastest and hardest ball then-or-now in the Majors. His lifetime record of 3,508 strikeouts still stands and no pitcher since has even approached this total. Street, his favorite receiver, was catching Johnson when, indeed, the Big Train had a full head of steam and the throttle wide open. Street, in later years, said of the big pitcher, that this blinding fast ball was like catching a feather and that he was so accurate that you could sit in a rocking chair and catch him. Indeed, Johnson seldom walked more than two or three men in a game. With Street as his catcher, the Big Train confided to one reporter that, "we never wasted a pitch. I just threw where Gabby held his glove. One run was all we needed. He was a perfect target with a greased arm and as spry as a cat." It was with Clark Griffith's old Washington Nationals that Gabby achieved his greatest claim to fame--and this not on the baseball diamond but at the Washington Monument--the date August 21, 1908.

The event grew out of a heated argument in a men's club in Washington. John Biddle offered to bet Preston Gibson \$500 that no baseball player could catch a baseball dropped from the top of the Washington Monument. Gibson, a Washington newsman and playwright, announced that he would take the bet and wouldn't have to go far to find the man for the job. Gibson asked Gabby Street, the National's new ace catcher, to attempt the feat. Street promptly accepted the challenge. Because of the very obvious dangers involved, permission of the Superintendent of Buildings and Grounds had to be secured and finally on the morning of August 21 the stage was set. Gibson hiked up the stairs to the observation floor atop the 555 foot obelisk, a basket of baseballs and a small

wooden chute in hand. Few knew of the stunt and only a scattering of spectators, several newspapermen, photographers, and several stray youngsters were on hand as Street positioned himself. The catcher was bareheaded, dressed in street clothes, wore no face mask or chest protector, and used a regulation mitt. A prearranged signal notified him when a ball was to be dropped. Because of the unpredictable winds, each of the first ten balls rolled down the chute and rickoched crazily against the side of the monument on their way down, making a catch impossible. Changing tactics, Gibson threw number 11 and 12 out the narrow opening atop the monument, each of which grazed the catcher's mitt. Finally on number 13, Street caught and held on to the bullet-like whirr of white. The jolt staggered him but he held on long enough for Gibson to collect his bet.

The journalists and photographers present, Gibson included, knew a story when they saw one. They made the most of it. Street immediately became the toast of the town. The feat made front page headlines in the Washington Evening Star and thousands of these special editions were rushed out to the ballpark where the Nationals were to play the Detroit Tigers that afternoon. When Street took his place behind the plate he was given a thunderous and standing ovation. He caught Walter Johnson that afternoon for still another taste of blinding fast baseball. Washington won 3 to 1 on the Big Train's five-hitter.

Overnight, Washington was swept up in the excitement. Street spent the evening and night receiving calls and telegrams of congratulations. With the new wire services, the story now went nation-wide. Article after article from academic authorities was devoted to speculations on just how fast the ball was traveling when Street made the catch. The authorities varied in their calculations from 63 to 193 miles per hour or somewhere between 92 and 282 feet per second. The arguments were to survive for

many months. The famous baseball was later to be auctioned several times during War Bond rallies.

In 1912 Street moved on to the New York Yankees but 1913 and 14 again found him back in the minors with Chatanooga; 1915 through 1917 saw another move to Nashville of the same Southern Association.

Baseball, like all of America, was caught up in World War I. The now 36 year old Street enlisted and soon found himself in the trenches of France. Wounded twice by machine gun bullets from a German plane and once being gassed, the Old Sarge became perhaps the most decorated soldier-athlete of the War.

Gabby returned to Nashville for the 1919 season. Turning his attention now to being a player-manager, he served the Suffolk, Virginia team of the Piedmont League in 1920 and 21. The next two years saw him serving in a similar capacity in Joplin, Missouri; 1924 and 25 with Muskogee, Oklahoma; 1926, Augusta, Georgia; 1927, Columbia, South Carolina. The Southern Association beckoned him again in 1928, this time as player-manager with Knoxville.

Lightening can strike more than once. Street's third big break came with the 1929 season. This time as a coach with the roughshod St. Louis Cardinals, National League. The next year, 1930, Branch Ricke moved him up to Manager. This was the era of Pepper Martin, Frankie Frisch and a green newcomer named Jerome (Dizzy) Dean.

Gabby put together Cardinal pennant winning teams during both of the next two years. Frisch later recalled how Pepper Martin hit and ran the Cardinals to a 1931 World Series victory over the Philadelphia Athletics. Frisch, the firey second baseman, was to succeed Street as Cardinal Manager late in 1933 and the Hell-for-leather

era of the Gas House Gang was born.

Again, back to the Pacific Coast League for the 1934 and 1935 seasons, this time as Manager of the San Francisco team. 1936 and 1937 saw Street as Manager, in St. Paul, of the American Association.

Now for the forth time, the majors again beckoned--across town from his old Cardinals. The St. Louis Browns of the American League hired Street as their manager in 1938 and, wonder upon wonder, he took them all the way for the pennant. Street, thus joined the tiny few who have piloted both National and American League teams to pennant victories. The following year, 1939, Street was reappointed Manager of the Browns but the years had taken their toll and he asked to be released from active duty. Street was to spend the next ten years alongside Harry Carey in radio broadcasting with the St. Louis Cardinals where his rich store of baseball stories enlivened many a slow game for thousands of fans.

Always known as a fighter, a hustler and an aggressive leader, Street hated losing. During his playing days, Gabby was a superb catcher. His lifetime batting average in the majors was, however, a puny .208 and his best season was in 1905 when he hit .238 with the Reds and Braves. The only time he went over .300 as a batter, he slugged a .308 average as Joplin player-manager when he was 41 years old.

Gabby Street lost his last game fight to an old enemy, a malignancy with which twice before in 1915 and 1919 he had had bouts. The final inning came for the Old Sarge at his retirement home in Joplin, Missouri, February 6, 1951. Baseball had lost one of its most colorful characters.