

Opinion: Not all baseball artifacts are in Cooperstown

By Larry Weitzman

Our national pastime, baseball has been with us since the middle of the 19th century. To honor its greatest players, a shrine in Cooperstown, N.Y., was created almost 80 years ago to honor the greatest that have played the game.

But as we are learning, to become a member of the Baseball Hall of Fame you need to be elected by 75 percent of the approximately 500 baseball/sports journalists who are members of the Baseball Writers Association of America. The election is in January of each year.

Founded by Stephen Clark, grandson of Edward Clark who was a founder of the Singer Sewing Machine Company, the site of the Hall of Fame was part of a gymnasium built by Clark's father Alfred Corning Clark. It was the first gymnasium built in Cooperstown and Cooperstown was the birthplace of Stephen Clark. Part of Clark's thinking with respect to the hall was tourism for Cooperstown.



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With nearly 500 baseball writers making the selection, the procedure is very political. Just look at the controversy created by the likes of Mark McGwire or Sammy Sosa, players with incredible credentials but politically barred by the

alleged use performance enhancing drugs. Look what happened to Barry Bonds. McGwire and Sosa perhaps single-handedly saved the game after the baseball player strike of the mid-1990s with their home run duel in 1998. It brought fans back to the game in droves.

However, there is another place that these baseball players may find themselves someday, the Baseball Reliquary. Founded in 1996 in Monrovia, Calif., by Terry Cannon, the Reliquary contains artifacts of the game like some of the original turf and soil from Elysian Fields (located in Hoboken, N.J.), thought to be the place of the first organized (played under the first written rules) baseball game played on June 19, 1846.

Cannon says the Reliquary celebrates the merging of baseball, culture and art and the effect on all three as well as people who had an affect on the game that may not be well known, like Emmett Ashford who became the first black umpire in the Major Leagues. But the reason Ashford is significant isn't necessarily his skin color, but because Ashford turned umpiring into an "artform."

Those of us who were here during the era of the Pacific Coast League and teams like the Sacramento Solons, Hollywood Stars, San Francisco Seals and the Los Angeles Angels knew Ashford well. He added style to the game with his "colorful" moves and he was a sharp dresser off the field. When Ashford made it to the show in 1960, Cannon actually got his autograph at Angels stadium (the Big "A") in the early 1960s.

Cannon has been a baseball fanatic since he first read as a 9 year old child in 1962 the book "Veeck is a wreck." Bill Veeck Jr. was the general manager of the Chicago White Sox who in 1951 put 3-foot-7-inch Eddie Gaedel in the line up to get the team a walk. Shortly thereafter American League President Will Harridge banned midgets from the game. While Gaedel's jersey wore the number "1/8" and hangs in the Hall of Fame, his

athletic supporter is part of the Reliquary collection along with a miniature trophy given to him by the St. Louis Browns sponsor, Falstaff Brewery. Cannon since has read hundreds of books about baseball. One of the Reliquary supporters is Jim Bouton, former big league pitcher and author of the best seller "Ball Four."

In 1999, the Reliquary started its own hall of fame called the Shrine of Eternals, honoring three people every year voted in by its 300-plus members. And the beauty is anyone can become a member so the public essentially votes members in. There are currently 42 Shrine members and they are an eclectic group. Members include Jim Abbott (one-armed pitcher), Yogi Berra, Ila Borders (daughter of former Major Leaguer Pat Borders. Ila pitched for the Colorado Silver Bullets and reportedly had an 86 mph fastball), Bill Buckner, Steve Dalkowski, Mark "the Bird" Fidrych, Shoeless Joe Jackson, Curt Flood (broke baseball's reserve clause), Bill "Spaceman" Lee, Roger Maris, Minnie Minoso (played in six decades), Pete Rose, Casey Stengel, Louis Tiant, Fernando Valenzuela and many others, some of whom are already in the Hall of Fame.

On a recent ballot were people like Sy Berger, who joined Topps bubble gum Company as a sales promotion executive after World War II and re-invented the modern baseball card as we know it today. Also on the ballot is a star from the Pacific Coast League's Los Angeles Angels, Steve Bilko who hit 56 home runs and won the PCL's Triple Crown in 1956. I saw him play many times and being a Hollywood Stars fan, didn't like him much. It is said that Phil Silvers, who starred as Sargent Bilko in the TV comedy "You'll Never Get Rich" took his characters name from Steve Bilko because of his popularity. (I thought Silvers took the name as a play on words because he was always trying to bilk people out of money.)

Ballots are replete with others who made significant contributions to the game like Bert Campaneris (he played all nine positions in one game in 1965 and became part of the A's

World Championship dynasty from 1972-74), Rocky Colavito, Carlos Delgado, Ernie Harwell, Bo Jackson, Manny Mota, Tug McGraw (his son is singer Tim McGraw whose other talent is baseball as well. Tim played in the minor leagues), Annie Savoy (yes, a character from Ron Shelton's film classic Bull Durham), Rusty Staub (whose charitable foundation created the year after his retirement from the game after 23 years in the Bigs has raised more than \$112 million), Fay Vincent, Rube Waddell and even Don Zimmer. There are more, too many to name, but you get the idea.

The Reliquary which goes on periodic display at various libraries and similar venues in Southern California are loaded with significant and unusual artifacts of the game like Joe Bauman's 70th home run ball from 1954, 44 years before Mark McGwire accomplish the feat, Bauman did it while playing for the class C league Roswell Rockies (he went on to hit 72 that year). Or does the Dave Bresnahan potato pique your interest? What is a potato doing in the Reliquary you ask?

Bresnahan was catching for the Double A Williamsport team in the Eastern League and before the game he made a potato look like a baseball and concealed it on his body. When there was an opposing runner on third base he threw the potato wildly over his third baseman's head in a pickoff attempt. The runner on third came home and was tagged out with the real ball which Bresnahan still held in his glove. The umpire called the play deceptive and awarded the runner home and threw Bresnahan out of the game. The next day he was released by the club and his career was over, but he became an instant celebrity. Three years later the club had a Dave Bresnahan day and retired his number. Not bad for a backup catcher hitting .140. A young fan retrieved the potato and preserved it.

A recent documentary DVD by Jon Leonoudakis aptly sums up the Reliquary with the title "Not exactly Cooperstown, an unorthodox look at America's most orthodox game." If you love

baseball, you at least have to visit their website. Just give yourself enough time, because it is like a book you cannot put down.

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