

The INSIDE GAME

The Official Newsletter of SABR's Deadball Era Committee



Special Larry Ritter Issue: "Let's get this lumpy, licorice-stained ball rolling!" April 2004

From the Chairman

Thanks, Larry

by Tom Simon
 tpsimon@aol.com

I first met Larry Ritter on August 23, 1997, the day that my friends Henry Thomas and Neal McCabe were recording the introductions for the audio version of *The Glory of Their Times*. Knowing that I was a member of the Ritter Generation, that legion of baseball fans who first discovered the Deadball Era by reading a copy of *Glory*, Henry thought I might like to hear Larry talk firsthand about what it was like to interview Sam Crawford, Fred Snodgrass, Jimmy Austin, and the rest.

That morning I flew from Vermont to New York City and took a taxi to Larry's apartment on the Upper West Side. When I arrived, Henry was dealing with a "situation"—one of Larry's neighbors was playing loud music on his stereo—while Neal was making adjustments to the high-tech equipment that would turn Larry's living room into a recording studio. Finally we got started, and for the next several hours I was enraptured. If you own a copy of the audio version of *Glory* (and if you don't, you should), you can actually hear me in the background of the Chief Meyers intro, cracking up at Larry's story about Chief giving George Weiss a jar of pebbles from his basement and passing them off as a gift from the Quachiotle Indians.

One by one Larry improvised introductions for each of the players, roughly in the order in which they appeared in the book. It must have been 4 p.m. by the time he finally reached Goose Goslin. Larry gave a perfect intro on the first take—either it was perfect or Hank's and Neal's perfectionism was

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Larry Ritter and Tom Simon, New York, 1997. Tom proudly holds his "Goose Goslin" baseball.

Larry Ritter and Wahoo Sam: Predestination?

by Bill Lamberty
 blamberty@msubobcats.com

Larry Ritter put Wahoo, Nebraska, on the map.

Technically Wahoo, located in the rolling farm country of eastern Nebraska, came to be in the 1870s, a half-century before Ritter, the famous economist and author, was born. The small burg has long been a county seat, and an agricultural and commercial hub in a rural area not immediately served by the cities of Lincoln or Omaha. In fact, Wahoo is about a half-hour from Lincoln, Omaha, and Fremont. Those who grow up in Nebraska usually hear stories of the prodigious ballplayer from tiny Wahoo before they graduate from elementary school.

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HONUS LOBERT
 Philadelphia N. L.
 3rd Base

Hans vs. the Horse:
 Did Ritter get it right?

Glory as History

By James E. Elfers
jeelfers@netscape.net

Two inevitable questions arise whenever one reads *The Glory of Their Times*: “How accurate is this book?” and “Can we trust the memories of these men?” This article will examine one of the more famous tales in *Glory* and compare it to contemporary accounts. In doing so it shows that Lawrence Ritter wrote the furthest thing possible from a collection of tall tales; *Glory* is staggeringly accurate history.

Though all of the book is a treasure, perhaps no story in *The Glory of Their Times* is as fondly recalled as that of Hans Lobert’s race against a horse in Oxnard, California. What happens when contemporary accounts of that day’s events are compared with Lobert’s memory? Is any major deficit discovered? The answer is a resounding No! The fleet-footed Phillie remembered all but the smallest of details. Fifty plus years had not diminished his memory to any significant degree.

The primary source, aside from local press accounts, are the writings of Frank McGlynn, an eyewitness to Lobert’s day in the Oxnard sun. McGlynn, a motion picture director, made the film “Giants-White Sox World Tour,” which is unfortunately now lost. That film included documentary footage, bits of slapstick comedy, and the irrepressible antics of Germany Schaefer while chronicling the Giants and White Sox global adventures. Upon his return to the States, McGlynn penned a five-part series relating the adventure he shared with the “tourists” for *The Base Ball Magazine*. Putting these sources together with “Glory” reveal just how accurate Hans Lobert’s memory was and how little of it he had lost over the years.

Lobert in *Glory*: “There was a huge crowd there, maybe 5,000 people.”

The Oxnard Daily Chronicle, November 12, 1913: “Over 4,500 Fans See Giants Trounce White Sox 3-2 on Oxnard Athletic field.”

Lobert: “... they took us out to this big ranch for a huge barbecue.”

Frank McGlynn, writing for *The Base Ball Magazine*, August

1914: “The players were provided with cars and conducted to the ranch of Mr. Charles Rowe, where a real California bull’s-head breakfast and barbecue was enjoyed as only such an affair can be.”

As for the game itself, contemporary accounts agree with Lobert’s recollection that the crowd of cowboys clamored for the game to stop so that the race between horse and man could occur. Lobert even gets the inning right.

Lobert: “So along about the seventh inning McGraw came to me and said ‘John, we can’t finish this game. You might as well get ready to run the horse around the bases.’”

McGlynn: “Lobert (the fastest base runner living) agreed to race around the diamond. Interest in the event was intense, as a large portion of the residents of Oxnard are cattle men. An enormous crowd filled the stands (the game was a close contest, the score 2 to 1 at the beginning of the ninth inning) and, despite their great desire to witness the end of the baseball contest, the spectators were completely absorbed in the remarkable race between man and horse.”

Lobert: “Then from this mass of cowboys encircling the outfield steps the most beautiful black animal you ever saw, with a Mexican cowboy on him all dressed up in chaps and spangles.”

McGlynn: “The horse was ridden by a Mexican vaquero.”

The Mexican cowboy was one Panfilio Lorenzana, and he was indeed all duded up for this event.

McGlynn: “After discussing their line of progress, Lobert and the rider moved to the scratch. Klem gave the word ‘Go’ and both horse and rider were off in a flash.”

Lobert: “The cowboy couldn’t speak English so I said, ‘Señor, practico. We’ll take a practice walk around the bases.’ Around we walked, the crowd was roaring and the moving-picture cameras were whirring. *Pathe News* was there. I was to touch the inner corner of each base, and he was to go around outside, so as not to run me down. Finally everything was all set. Bill Klem was to be the referee and we were ready to go.”

Even the details of the race itself meld flawlessly.

Lobert: “I led at first by at least five feet, and by second base I picked up and was at least ten feet ahead. I was in perfect stride ... I was still in front when we rounded third, but not by much.”

McGlynn: “Lobert got into his stride quicker than the horse, rounding first well in the lead. At second he was still a yard ahead and lengthened his lead on the turn to about twenty-five feet ... ‘Honus’ reached third first, but only by a shade.”

Both accounts conclude that Lobert lost the race around second base.

McGlynn: “...at second base he turned his head to see if the horse was dangerously near; this threw him slightly out of his stride and had he not done so, he would have won the race.”

Lobert: “... he crowded me between second and third and I had to dodge to avoid being knocked down. I broke stride, and that was the end ... I still think I would have won if I had not been practically bowled over at shortstop.”

So what did Hans Lobert get wrong?

Lobert: “We arrived in Oxnard at about seven in the morning and were met at the train by about ten stage coaches.” Actually, the tourists arrived at 10:30 a.m. and were driven to Rowe’s ranch in automobiles. Lobert also incorrectly remembered a starter pistol being fired to begin the mad dash about the bases.

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Committee Chair
Tom Simon: tpsimon@aol.com

Newsletter Editor
Charles Crawley: crcrawley@yahoo.com

Database Manager/Proofreader
Dan Desrochers: desrochsox@comcast.net

Glory as History, continued from page 2.

So when one reads *Glory* one is reading a book with virtually no exaggeration or false recollection. It is not your grandfather walking to school through eight feet of snow; it is the real unvarnished truth. ♦

From the Chairman, continued from page 1.

beginning to wane—and before I knew it, Larry was on to the next player.

“Wait a second!” I exclaimed. “Is that all you’re going to say about The Goose?”

Aside from the cackle during the Meyers intro, it was about the only thing that had come out of my mouth all day, and everyone looked at me with stunned expressions. “What more do you want to know?” asked Larry.

I explained that Goslin was one of my favorites, and that I’d love to hear more about what he was like as a person, among other things. Hank and Neal sat patiently while Larry answered all of my questions. Then Larry excused himself for a minute and shuffled off to a closet. When he returned, he tossed me a baseball—signed by Goose Goslin! “That’s for you,” he said.

Stories like that abound about Larry, but he was equally generous with his praise and encouragement. I did an oral history with Twins pitcher Len Whitehouse that appeared in the 1998 edition of *The National Pastime*. You can imagine how I felt when I received a note from Larry, telling me that I showed great promise as an oral historian. He was also an avid supporter of the Deadball Era Committee and was sincerely honored that we named a book award after him.

I’m looking at my Goose Goslin baseball as I type this. It sits on a shelf here in my “baseball room,” next to a photo of Larry and me taken on the day he gave it to me. Every time I look at those mementoes, I think about how few have done as much to encourage the next generation of baseball researchers as Larry Ritter. ♦

Larry Ritter & Wahoo Sam, continued from page 1.

Wahoo was even on the map before Sam Crawford, the town’s favorite son and most prominent native, came along in 1880. In fact, the municipality boasts of “Five Famous Men,” including a Nobel Prize winner, a Pulitzer Prize winner, and famed filmmaker Darryl Zanuck. But decades after the passing of each of the Five, Crawford’s star still shines the brightest.

A lot of the credit for that must go to Lawrence Ritter.

The story of Ritter’s first meeting with the former Tiger outfielder has become part of baseball legend. Ritter, a young economics professor chasing down old ballplayers to tell their stories, found Crawford doing his laundry in a small oceanside community in central California. He came upon Crawford almost by accident, and turned that chance encounter into an unforgettable story.

That is true of Ritter’s entire project. In the process of eliciting stories from long-forgotten ballplayers, the project that came to be *The Glory of Their Times* hit a major nerve in baseball fans. That project sprung from a passion for the game he had

once shared with his estranged father, a passion he carried with him throughout his life.

Ritter’s book revived interest in a lost generation of ballplayers. Stories of inhaling cinders on overnight train rides between cities, of bashing a mushy ball into the ally and legging out a triple, of familiar names like Babe Ruth and Ty Cobb and less familiar ones such as Willie Kamm and Rube Bressler. While Crawford entered the Hall of Fame in 1957—largely on the urging of his former Detroit outfield mate Ty Cobb—there’s no doubt that his fame was vastly escalated by *Glory*.

The Glory of Their Times had several unintended effects as well. It spawned a string of popular and well-done oral histories of baseball that have lent a great deal to understanding the game’s history. It also, many baseball historians contend, vaulted several of its subjects into baseball’s Hall of Fame. Luminaries such as Harry Hooper and Rube Marquard, who eloquently described their lives and the trials and joys of Deadball Era baseball, were elected in 1971, a couple of years after the publishing of *Glory*.

Perhaps the most interesting unintended consequence was, over the course of time, to raise the community of Wahoo, Crawford himself, and Ritter to national prominence. Crawford’s insistence on being referred to as “Wahoo Sam” reflected the love affair in which he and his hometown had been actively engaged for most of his life.

Ritter would never identify his favorite subject, telling friends that would be similar to a parent favoring one child over another. Many suspect, though, that Ritter’s favorite was and remained Crawford. In the years since Ritter profiled Wahoo Sam, the cosmos has entwined the story of the ballplayer with that of its author.

Given their mutual fondness and respect, the relationship between the New York born professor and the country ballplayer from Nebraska doesn’t even seem ironic. It seems almost pre-ordained. ♦



The Glory of Their Times: The Story of the Early Days of Baseball Told by the Men Who Played It, Enlarged Edition, by Lawrence S. Ritter. New York: William Morrow, 1984. Originally published in 1966.

A book review by **David Cicotello**
dcicotello@mail.unomaha.edu

Nearly forty years after its original publication, *The Glory of Their Times* by Lawrence S. Ritter stands as a remarkable and durable volume of baseball history. There is simply no other book like it before or since. Ritter's benchmark volume captures for "all-time" the oral history of baseball's early days as told by the players. It is to Ritter's enduring credit that he chose to do as he wrote in the Preface: listen to the players. That simple but critical decision is the difference maker. It separates *The Glory of Their Times* from the majority of other books about former major league ballplayers in which 'memoirs' are treatments to sell scandal and sensationalism.

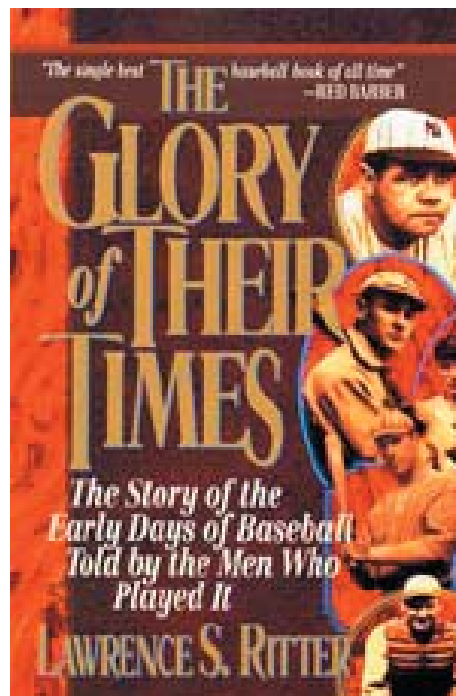
First published in 1966 and then expanded as an enlarged edition in 1984, *The Glory of Their Times* includes 22 (and then 26) interviews with ballplayers whose careers collectively span from the late 19th century (Tommy Leach and Sam Crawford) to nearly the middle of the twentieth century (Paul Waner and Hank Greenberg). The cast of characters not only recall their time on the diamond but also pay homage to baseball's demi-gods as fellow teammates or opposing players (some long dead at the time of the interviews). Babe Ruth, John McGraw, Connie Mack, Grover Cleveland Alexander, Tris Speaker, Ty Cobb, Christy Mathewson, Fred Clarke, Napoleon Lajoie, Rogers Hornsby, Honus Wagner, and Walter Johnson share the stage with Ritter's subjects but do not dominate it.

As Ritter listens to each player, he is able to draw forth from his subject an authentic voice who speaks convincingly to the reader: Edd Roush on the fixing of

the 1919 World Series (baseball's fall from grace); Fred Snodgrass on Fred Merkle (the sport's most ignominious blunderer); Bill Wambsgans on the fleeting nature of glory (who acknowledges his place in baseball lore for executing the only unassisted triple play in World Series history); Davy Jones on being the first batter ever to face Johnson (who also genuinely expresses pity for Cobb because he had few friends); and Sam Crawford on virtually all the stars of the Deadball Era (who discloses he's a reader of Robert Ingersoll, Santayana, and Balzac).

Ritter's gift is that he allows his subjects to take the conversation where they want to go with it and not the other way around. The self-effacing author *knows* his role in this unmatched collection of first-person memoirs, minimally edited to preserve the immediacy and vibrancy of the spoken word. The result is treasure of perspectives that gravitate to an era when baseball was dominated by the inside game, the sacrifice and the steal, guile and bravado.

Remarkable and durable are qualities of a classic. Ritter's *The Glory of Their Times* meets the standard. In his 1966 *New York Times* review of the book, Wilfrid Sheed concludes the average sports memoir is replete with "simpering modesty and high-minded platitude." *The Glory of Their Times*, according to Mr. Sheed, "tells it right."♦



The Image of Their Greatness: An Illustrated History of Baseball from 1900 to the Present, by Lawrence Ritter and Donald Honig, Third Revised and Updated Edition. New York: Crown Publishers, 1992.

A book review by **Jeff Sackmann**
jeff_sackmann@hotmail.com

To judge from *The Image of Their Greatness* by Lawrence Ritter and Donald Honig, baseball is game of heroes and young men. One suspects that this is precisely the authors' intent: they tell us in the Preface, "The camera captures and holds forever the heroes of childhood, the memories of youth." Thus, like so many of the best baseball books, it is not exactly a traditional "history," as the title claims; it is a pleasant tour through a collective, forgiving memory.

And what a journey it is. Ritter and Honig offer a vast selection of photographs that make just about every player pictured look like a hero-in-waiting, a 21-year-old bush leaguer at his first spring training. We see an early portrait of Christy Mathewson, a shot of Stan Hack smiling for the camera, and a candid picture of a young Rocky Colavito signing baseballs. All these men have a sparkle in their eye that suggests that such a glint was the deciding factor between this one and another photo that didn't make it into the book.

A photographic history succeeds or fails on the basis of deciding factors like that one, and *Image* is thus a resounding success. While the authors include a handful of classic pictures—Cobb sliding into third under Jimmy Austin, the Babe calling his shot, Fisk waving his home run fair—the vast majority of those included are unfamiliar. A full-page photo of a glowering Rogers Hornsby tells us more about him than the authors can in the thumbnail biography they provide for each major figure. Every few pages, a picture reveals an unexpected glimpse into an almost-forgotten star.

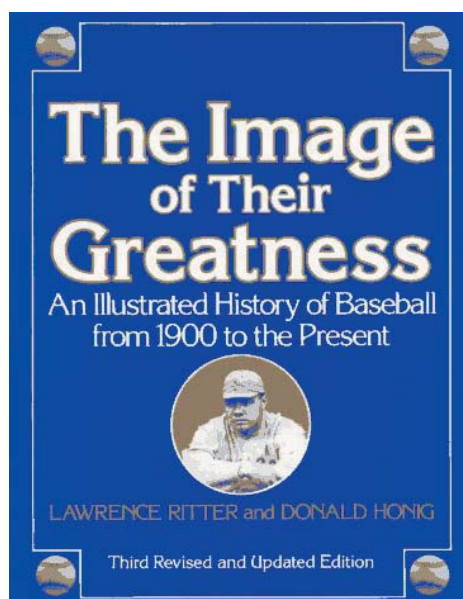
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Image, continued from page 4.

While *Image* reminds us of figures such as Chief Meyers and Jeff Pfeffer, it does a poor job of rendering a complete picture of twentieth-century American baseball. The history of the Negro Leagues is condensed into fewer than 10 photos and only turns up in the story when the authors must put Jackie Robinson's arrival in context. Only the briefest mention is accorded minor league powerhouses like Jack Dunn's Baltimore Orioles, and small-town baseball—surely a striking visual counterpoint to images of a packed Yankee Stadium—is completely ignored.

Further, the book's exclusion of nineteenth-century baseball forces it to leave out still more memorable (and available) pictures. It also produces a jarring effect to the knowledgeable fan when John McGraw comes on the scene in mid-career and Ty Cobb's aggressiveness is not placed in the context of players like Mike Kelly and Arlie Latham.

But it is a waste of a good photographic history to dwell too long on its faults; *Image of Their Greatness* is surely a volume to be treasured, both for its succinct narrative account of the highlights of twentieth-century Major League Baseball and for its inclusion of so many memorable photographs. Indeed, few books tell us so much about so many of the men who made baseball history, in print or pictures. ♦



Lost Ballparks: A Celebration of Baseball's Legendary Fields, by Lawrence S. Ritter. New York: Viking Studio Books, 1992.

A book review by **Doug Skipper**
DSKIPPER@marketsolutionsgroup.com

To baseball fans the names are magical: Forbes Field, Shibe Park, The Polo Grounds, Sportsman Park, Ebbetts Field. Their monikers conjure nostalgic images of lazy summer afternoons; dirt-smudged gray flannel uniforms framed by green grass, and dark horsehide baseballs thumping into darker leather mitts. We can hear the peanut vendor bellow and smell hot dogs roasting.

Lawrence S. Ritter takes us to that ballpark—actually to 22 of them—in his seventh baseball book, *Lost Ballparks, a Celebration of Baseball's Legendary Fields*. After setting the table with a short history of baseball architecture, Ritter provides a sentimental tour of 18 major league and four minor league ballparks no longer standing.

In his landmark work *The Glory of Their Times*, and in *The Image of Their Greatness*, his brilliant collaboration with Donald Honig, Ritter let the players tell their stories. In *Lost Ballparks*, Ritter takes his turn. He presents a brief history, spiced with anecdotes, about the key events and hometown heroes who graced each park. And he lovingly documents the oddities and nuances that gave each structure its own personality: The center field steps at the Polo Grounds, the inclined left field terrace at Crosley Field, the Schaefer Beer sign on the right field scoreboard at Ebbetts Field.

Ritter details the demise of each ballpark and concludes each chapter with a list of the ballpark's Ten Most Memorable Moments. It is said that all true stories end in death: *Lost Ballparks* provides 22 poignant obituaries. It also provides a thorough index, a comprehensive bibliography, an emotional introduction by Robert Creamer, and Ritter's curmudgeonly comments about modern stadiums.

Ritter's writing is complemented by

a fine selection of historical photographs. We see the seating arrangements and fence lines from within the parks, the brick facades outside, and from the air, we see the shapes of the parks, and how they fit into the neighborhoods where they resided. Some of the illustrations are familiar, like Ty Cobb sliding into third base at New York's Hilltop Park, Willie Mays deep in center field at the Polo Grounds for an over-the-shoulder catch in the 1954 World Series, the exploding scoreboard at Comiskey Park, and President William Howard Taft tossing out the first ball at Washington D.C.'s American League Park (a.k.a. Griffith Stadium). Some of the images are less familiar. We see a rowboat inside a flooded Crosley Field in Cincinnati, Babe Ruth sprawled unconscious after charging into the concrete wall at Griffith Stadium, Jayne Mansfield hanging out at Gilmore Stadium in Hollywood, and Charlie Finley astride a mule at Municipal Stadium in Kansas City.

If you are looking for a definitive baseball stadium reference, there are more inclusive works. If you are looking for odes to fields yet standing like Wrigley or Fenway, look elsewhere. But if you are looking for a nostalgic, sentimental, romantic time capsule tour of ballparks that have passed into history, Lawrence S. Ritter's *Lost Ballparks* is the place to visit. ♦

