

LETTER FROM THE EDITOR



My dad raised me to pitch for the St. Louis Cardinals, the overwhelming favorite of all of our country boy/dads who had grown up during the Great Depression listening to the Cardinals' "gas house" gang on the radio. I seemed well on my way to the big leagues at age 12, when I pitched a one-hit shut out in a Little League All-Star game with much of my town in attendance. Unfortunately, that marked the

peak of my baseball career; when I finally made it to St. Louis years later, it was as a graduate student, not a pitcher.

But I always remained a baseball fan. Growing up in a world without much chance to travel, I embraced baseball as a window on the world. I came to enjoy reading in part by following the major leagues in our local newspapers and by reading biographies of baseball players. Baseball taught me geography, giving me a reason to locate on a map New York City, home of the mighty Yankees, and then to move on to the location of both the Bronx (site of Yankee Stadium) and Brooklyn (home of the Dodgers). Photos of the amazing baseball stadiums of the 1950s introduced me to the basics of architecture and even of urban planning. Math was much more fun once I learned how to figure batting averages and earned run averages. History was everywhere in baseball, from the great names in the Hall of Fame to the records of such mythic figures as Babe Ruth.

More than anything, baseball gave me a cast of larger-than-life characters with exotic names and unfamiliar backgrounds. Mickey Mantle, country boy from Oklahoma whose dad had raised him to be a switch-hitter for the Yankees, was recognizable to me. But my world had to be expanded to include other players such as Willie Mays, Ted Kluszewski, "Big Chief" Allie Reynolds, Minnie Minoso, or Yogi Berra. These baseball heroes gave me a parallel universe somewhat like later generations had with the Star Wars movies or video games or the

Harry Potter books. The universe of major league baseball had the great advantage, however, of being populated by real people succeeding and failing at a game I played and knew.

Unfortunately, few of us had the chance to see these players in a real live major league baseball game, since St. Louis, the closest major league city, might as well have been in a galaxy far, far away. We knew, however, that the major leaguers were real because we had seen a few of them pass through the minor league team in nearby Beaumont, and a few of us had even been privileged to take the hundred mile trip to see the Houston Buffs play. Those of us with access to televisions could also watch the game of the week and then the World Series, an event so important in my family that my parents at times allowed me to skip school when a series game was played on my birthday.

So it was an amazing development when we learned that major league baseball was coming to Houston. On several memorable occasions my dad and I drove to Houston to games at the team's temporary stadium. Sitting out in the sun without a roof for a July Fourth doubleheader at Colt .45s Stadium, I learned the true meaning of hot. Later, at a somewhat cooler night game, I experienced one of my favorite baseball moments, when Stan Musial unwound on a fastball and drove a high line drive far, far out into the darkness of the parking lot beyond the right field fence. The ball curved foul, but that did not change the thrill of seeing it jump off of the bat of Stan the (Old) Man, who retired the next year.

Despite the temperature and bugs at the temporary stadium, I was one of the few people disappointed in the move to the new Astrodome. As is clear from the article in this issue by Mike Acosta, it was an amazing structure. But I have to agree with much of Larry McMurtry's reprinted essay. The Dome was a strange, disorienting place, as well as a bad place for a traditional fan to watch baseball. Astroturf had an evil impact on the game I loved. Although major leaguers played there, the Dome never seemed to me like a proper field for major league baseball.

This did not keep me from going to games. In my years at Rice in the late 1960s, I discovered the right field pavilion bargain seats, and I made it a habit to go watch the great pitchers of that era—Drysdale and Koufax, Juan Marichal, and my favorite, Bob Gibson of the St. Louis Cardinals. I also began to go out and watch the Astros' young star pitcher, Larry Dierker. During my freshman year, I would go over and catch a game when I needed to escape the agony of trying to pass calculus and German. There on the mound would be Dierker, only two years older than me and already in his third year in the majors. Forty years later, it was a cheap thrill to interview him for this "Summer Sports" issue of *Houston History*. Once a fan, always a kid.

JOEL DRAUT has found his dream job. Having spent thirty-five years as a newspaper photographer, he now combines his passion for photography and history as the senior communications specialist responsible for maintaining the collection of over four million images housed at the Houston Metropolitan Research Center (HMRC) in the Julia Ideson Building at the Houston Public Library. Every day reveals new treasures—from the oldest photo taken of Main Street in 1856, to a panoramic shot of the Goose Creek oil fields, to pictures of notable Houstonians like Howard Hughes and visitors such as the Beatles.

Draut is overseeing preparations to move the collection into the building's new wing. This facility will control temperature, humidity, pollution, and light to maximize the life of the originals, which include glass plates, negatives, prints, and film. He is also working to scan images, making them more accessible to the public while maintaining the integrity of the artifacts. To access the collection you can request assistance at the information desk in the HMRC or browse the catalogs and bound copies of the more popular images, but don't forget to ask for Joel—he will probably be your most valuable resource!

Joel contributed the Spring 2009 Houston History cover photo of the Julia Ideson building.



Holding a panoramic camera circa 1915, Joel Draut shares his office with a collection of photographic equipment spanning 100 years of technology.