

# Baseball Way Back:

## Why baseball and radio were meant for each other



**Steve Zalusky** in the Daily Herald November 14, 2020

It cost \$4.98 at Walgreens in 1971. I'm not sure what the vinyl would be worth today.

But no sum would convince me to part with "Jack Brickhouse Presents Great Moments in Cubs Baseball."



When I played it on the turntable of my dad's hi-fi, some of the great radio voices from the 1930s into the 1970s were paraded before my ears.

I heard Cubs voice Bert Wilson interviewing a shy 24-year-old Ernie Banks during spring training in 1955.

I was amused by the WGN team of Jack Quinlan and Lou Boudreau cracking up on air while reading an ad for women's lingerie and hosiery at Wieboldt's.

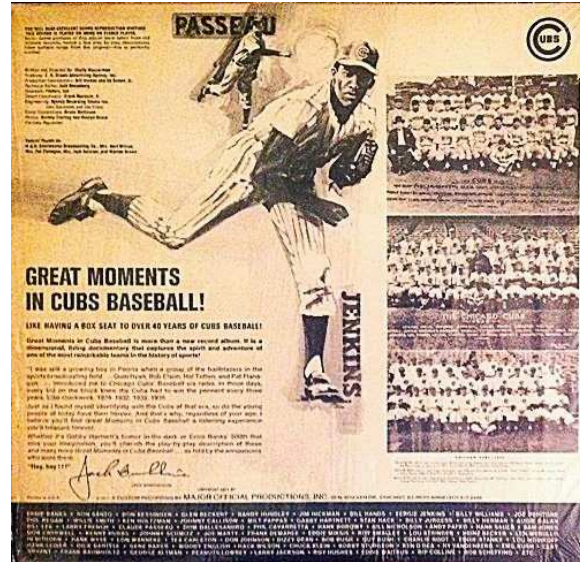
And there was even TV audio, including Brickhouse, who narrated the anthology, going bananas after Willie Smith's opening day walk-off homer in 1969.

Recently, radio celebrated its 100th anniversary. On Nov. 2, 1920, KDKA in Pittsburgh offered the first commercial radio broadcast. It soon became clear that radio and baseball were meant for each other.

The great broadcasters could create pictures in listeners' minds by capturing such details as how a hitter stood in the batter's box, a pitcher's glance toward first base, or an umpire brushing off home plate.

Listeners in the 1920s heard such pioneering announcers as "Sen" Kaney, who called the city series between the Cubs and Sox in 1924 on WGN, and WGN's versatile Quin Ryan, whose other duties included covering the Scopes "Monkey Trial."

I first tuned in baseball on my transistor radio in 1969, listening to White Sox announcer Bob Elson, one of the last links to radio's first decade -- Elson called his first pitch in 1929.



The contrast between the younger and older Elson is striking.

His call of the 1935 All-Star Game in Cleveland on the Mutual network reveals a machine-gun delivery that is rich in detail, as when he describes the Cardinals' Pepper Martin stealing second by hooking inside the bag and beating a high throw by Browns catcher Rollie Hemsley that forced Red Sox shortstop Joe Cronin to lean over second base to grab the ball.

By 1967, Elson, calling a late-season matchup between the White Sox and the Red Sox over WMAQ, while still detailed, is minimalist in his approach, leaving long swathes of dead air.

Elson, however, never relinquished a tendency to pronounce the word "the" as "thee."

Baseball broadcasts from the 1920s are, sadly, lost to us, aside from contemporary written accounts.

On Aug. 25, 1925, the Shreveport (Louisiana) Journal reported that Hal Totten, calling a Cubs-Phillies game over WMAQ, said, "The fielder catches the fly. Three out and the Cubs lose."

But, the paper continued, Cub fan Harry Madsen, sitting near the microphone, cried, "The hell they do, he dropped it!"

It turned out that Madsen was right, and listeners who heard his outburst over the air stayed tuned to enjoy the Cubs rallying in the ninth inning for the win.

A 1936 game called by Totten between the White Sox and the Red Sox at Comiskey Park over WCFL is available on YouTube.

Totten's guest during the pregame show is Sox outfielder Mike Kreevich, the same Kreevich remembered by humorist Jean Shepherd as "standing out in center field, with tobacco juice squirting out of both ears. He's just standing there; he looks like a fireplug with feet."

Kreevich reveals that before playing baseball, he worked in the coal mines.

Totten's broadcast is informal and more than a bit folksy -- he sends a casual greeting to Sox first baseman Zeke Bonura while delivering the lineups, and during the game itself, he banters with a visitor about his guest's trip to Ireland.

He calls grounders "bounders" and, in a nod to his sponsor, calls one bloop hit a "Texaco Leaguer."

I can understand how WBBM announcer Pat Flanagan became one of my dad's favorites.

His play-by-play during Game 2 of the 1938 World Series between the Cubs and Yankees is lively and captivating. But the real star is the Wrigley Field crowd, whose loud and lusty cheers threaten to drown out the play-by-play.

At the end of the third, Flanagan says Joe Marty, who drove in the Cubs' only three runs, "is going to get a big cheer from the stands out there as he goes towards center field. Let's listen to it."

The boos of the crowd are equally robust as the Yanks' Lou Gehrig, at one point grinning after nearly getting hit, repeatedly steps out of the batter's box against Cubs starter Dizzy Dean.

Flanagan's partner, John Harrington, is no slouch. He tells us the dusty red infield is as smooth as the top of a billiard table and later describes Dean's "slowball" as so slow you can almost see the seams.

While other radio formats and genres have faded over time and migrated to television -- soap operas, dramas, comedies, variety shows -- baseball has stood the test of time. It is likely to withstand that test as it continues into the era of apps and audio on demand.