

A Baseball Pilgrimage

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By Jim Killam

In July 1993, I sat 15 rows behind Wrigley Field's third-base dugout with my oldest son, Ben. He was 6, and this was his first Cub game.

During the first inning, he asked who the other team was. "The San Diego Padres," I said. "They're from California."

Ben thought for a moment.

"They came a long way just to play baseball."

That memory occurred to me a couple of Saturdays ago as Ben, his brother Zack and I stood inside a dimly lit exhibit room at the National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum in Cooperstown, N.Y.

We came a long way just to see Babe Ruth's bowling ball.

Eight hundred sixty-eight miles, to be exact. In one day, with a rented Chevrolet Classic and on a shoestring budget. I'd asked my wife and daughter repeatedly: "Are you sure you don't want to come along? Drive 14 hours on Friday, see the Hall of Fame on Saturday and then drive 14 hours home on Sunday?"

They were sure.

So, this would be that ultimate father-sons weekend. The baseball pilgrimage. The road trip we always said we should take sometime but never thought we'd really do. The perfect antidote to a cold March filled with news about steroids and liars, news about sore-armed Cubs pitchers and substantially less hope than we felt a year ago as Opening Day approached.

So, almost 33 years after I watched my first Cub game on WGN-TV, here I was, staring at a baseball from that game and telling my teenage sons about Burt Hooton's no-hitter against the Phillies.

The Hall of Fame and Museum are a baseball nut's paradise. A lot of the artifacts are what you'd expect: The Yankee stadium locker used by Joe DiMaggio and later by Mickey Mantle. The 1910 baseball from Cy Young's 500th win (his 512 career total may be the most untouchable record in sports). Shoeless Joe Jackson's White Sox jersey and glove from 1919. Roberto Clemente's 1971 World Series ring. And the Holy Grail of

baseball cards, the 1909 Honus Wagner – which is only about half the size of a modern card and worth hundreds of thousands of dollars.

But the real fun, I thought, was the minutiae – the weird stuff somebody’s mother might have put out for a garage sale: Christy Mathewson’s checkers set. Lou Gehrig’s car keys. A Colt .45 pistol given to Carl Yastrzemski by Gene Autry. Mel Ott’s ashtray, given to him by West Point cadets. Cool Papa Bell’s sunglasses. The rosin bag used by Ralph Branca before he served up Bobby Thomson’s pennant-winning home run on Oct. 3, 1951.

And yes, Babe Ruth’s bowling ball and bag. The Babe gets a whole room, in fact. Not only do you get to see his 1927 60th home-run ball, and the bat from his called-shot 1932 World Series homer against the Cubs, but you also see his golf trophies, his cigar box, and his 1916-17 contract with the Boston Red Sox for \$2,625 a season.

The museum is decidedly low-tech. There are computer kiosks here and there with machines linked to the Hall’s Web site. A few TV screens in select spots show looped video of Ruth and others. But mostly, the museum lets the artifacts speak for themselves. Baseball hasn’t changed all that much in 150 years, and it’s fun to see the Greg Maddux and Cy Young exhibits get similar treatment.

Rockford is well-represented, both at the “Women in Baseball” and “Baseball goes to the Movies” areas, where the Rockford Peaches take center stage with the uniform of Dottie Ferguson Key, who played from 1945-54.

The actual Hall of Fame gallery is a separate room, filled with bronze plaques for each of the 260 enshrinees (counting Ryne Sandberg and Wade Boggs this summer). The mood here is hushed, like being at a cemetery. Some of the plaques get more attention than others; fans have rubbed Nolan Ryan’s nose to a gleaming, gold shine.

This is baseball heaven for Yankee fans, and the place was crawling with them. Like everything else, a trip to the Hall of Fame is too easy for Yankee fans. They’re here on a day trip, not a pilgrimage. Baseball pain to them is losing the World Series – not wondering if your team will even get there in your lifetime. The Hall of Fame is where all of their favorite players end up – not just one in a generation like most other teams.

On the day we were there, six boys who looked to be about 8 years old, all wearing Yankee jerseys and caps, played imaginary baseball in the World Series room. One slid into an imaginary home plate and they all erupted into celebration as a TV monitor played the real thing. The scene was enough to make me forget about the team they rooted for and think instead that baseball’s future is bright.

The best moment, though, was seeing a troop of Boy Scouts, all wearing Red Sox caps, making a beeline for the 2004 World Series exhibit.

“The bloody sock!” one boy shouted, and they all rushed to see it: Curt Schilling’s stained hosiery from Game 2. The kids and their proud dads took turns posing for pictures with the sock.

For Chicago fans, there are just cruel reminders: documents from the 1919 Black Sox scandal, a video recounting the 1969 Miracle Mets, a photo of Steve Bartman’s terrible moment and the Florida Marlins’ gaudy, 2004 World Series ring that looks like a diamond-covered Triscuit. I imagined what it might be like to come back to Cooperstown the year after the Cubs finally win. By then, my sons might be bringing their sons.

The museum is smaller than you’d imagine; you can see it all in three or four hours and not feel like you had to rush. Which is good, because browsing the memorabilia shops along Main Street in Cooperstown is almost as fun. Mantle is everywhere. The man must have spent 10 years of his tragically short life signing stuff that’s now for sale at big prices in just about every shop and restaurant.

We made some great finds more in our price range. Zack bought a sealed pack of Topps cards from 1987, including the gum. He and Ben discovered that 18-year-old baseball card gum has the taste and consistency of balsa wood – pretty much what it was like in 1987.

And I found a set of Cubs prints from 1972, the year I fell in love with baseball. The set includes my hero Billy Williams, Jose Cardenal, Rick Reuschel and the immortal Carmen Fanzone.

Soon, some of those pictures will grace my office at work. People will ask what they’re all about, and I’ll talk about the road trip. Some will tell me we drove a long way just to buy a picture of Carmen Fanzone.

Others – the kind of people who pose with their boys next to a bloody sock – will understand completely.

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If you go

Summer 2005 is a great time for Cub fans to visit Cooperstown. Second baseman Ryne Sandberg gets inducted July 31, along with Wade Boggs.

For lots of Hall of Fame information or to plan a trip, start at www.baseballhalloffame.org.

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