

*Night View, Red Blrd Stadium*



August 10, 2008----

COLUMBUS, Ohio---One of the summer's most hyped stories is the closing of Yankee Stadium.

I've been to Yankee Stadium several times and the real history was lost in a massive 1973 renovation that made the place feel cold and distant. "The House that Ruth Built" has the jigsawed look of a Kenny Rogers face-lift. The Ball Park Sports Bar & Grill and bowling alley across the street from the bleachers is more colorful than Yankee Stadium.

In reality, the best baseball stadium swan song this year is Cooper Stadium on the west side of Columbus, Ohio.

More fans have seen minor league baseball at "The Coop" than any other ballpark in history.

Cooper was built in 1932 as Red Bird Stadium, 1155 W. Mound St. It was the first stadium built with lights. Franklin Delano Roosevelt launched his presidential campaign in the yellow-bricked ballpark. Bob Dylan played Cooper twice. The Billy Graham crusade made regular stops at the stadium, the last being Sept. 26, 1993, when he drew 40,000 people.

The Coop was the first place I saw a baseball game.

During the mid-1960s my father took me to see the Columbus Jets at what was then called "Jet Stadium." I still have my metal "Junior Jets Baseball Club" button. The team was named the Jets because America was enamored with the space race. Astronaut John Glenn was from Ohio and workers from the Curtis Wright Aviation Plant gave birth to the Columbus suburb of Worthington. In 1984 the 15,000-seat ballpark was renamed Cooper Stadium to honor Harold Cooper, the team's former general manager and International League president.

In late June I drove to Columbus to catch the induction of the late Pancho Herrera into the International League Hall of Fame in ceremonies at the stadium. The slugging Cuban who never caught on in the major leagues was my first baseball hero. I had to see this.

Or maybe I was looking for the boy I used to be.

It seemed like a personal and geeky road trip until I arrived early for "Dime-A-Dog Night." I was surprised to see at least a dozen other tourists wandering around the stadium, taking pictures and reading placards about all the major leaguers who



GREAT COLUMBUS  
BILLY GRAM CRUSADE  
COPPLE STADIUM  
COLUMBUS, OHIO  
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have passed through Columbus.

The Clippers were a Yankees affiliate for 28 years. They had a manager with the beautiful name of Stump Merrill who developed future stars Derek Jeter, Jorge Posada and current Cub Alfonso Soriano. Today the Clippers are affiliated with the Washington Nationals. When I was a 9-year-old in Columbus the team was associated with the Pittsburgh Pirates.

Just like the Yankees, the Clippers have a "Monument Park" beyond the right field fence, but for some odd reason it is closed before and during games. I have succeeded in talking my way into the park by dealing weepy memories of Jet shortstop Freddie Patek.

A new 10,000-seat Huntington Park stadium is being built downtown, across from Nationwide Arena, the home of the NHL's Columbus Blue Jackets. A mini green monster will be in right field where fans can watch the game from within the wall. Wrigley Field-style bleachers will be part of the left field facade. The future of "The Coop" is unknown although I heard the ballpark might be turned into a race track.

The Clippers are unusual in professional sports in that the franchise and its ballpark are owned by Franklin County and overseen by the county parks and recreation board.

I noticed in the game program that all three Franklin County Commissioners are women. The county owns the franchise and stadium. During the mid-1960s you could see a cemetery beyond the stadium's left field fence. Today tall green trees eclipse the graveyard. Time only stands still in certain places.

"In terms of the place where most people have seen a minor league game we passed Rochester a few years ago," said Joe Santry, Columbus team historian since 1965. "We've had lots of tourists this year. This was the first stadium built with lights. It wasn't the first place where night baseball was played. Indianapolis and Syracuse put up portable lights as did the Kansas City Monarchs of baseball's Negro Leagues." When Larry MacPhail -- the grandfather of former Cub GM Andy MacPhail -- installed lights, Columbus outdrew its parent St. Louis Cardinals by 30,000 because of the newfangled night games.

At 85, the stadium's namesake, Harold Cooper, has seen it all.

He remembers when the Havana Sugar Kings, Atlanta Crackers and Toronto Blue Jays were members of the International League.

For me, these were far away places I wanted to see one day. I have been fortunate.

Cooper was around in 1937 when future Hall of Famer Enos "Country" Slaughter played for the Red Birds. "And he was country," Cooper said during a Clippers game. "He told Red Birds Vice President Branch Rickey he had to have more

money. When players hit home runs they got a case of Wheaties. The radio announcer talked about how great Wheaties were and asked Enos what he did with them. Enos answered, 'I send them home Roxboro, N.C. to Pop and they feed them to the hogs.' That's the last time Enos went on radio."

I stayed at the Westin Columbus Great Southern Hotel, built in 1897 at 310 S. High St. The Southern Theatre still stands next to the hotel and is used for occasional productions. In 1903 a touring production of "Ben-Hur" rolled through Columbus. According to the CAPA (Columbus Association for the Performing Arts), the troupe included a cast of 350 and a chariot race in which two teams of horses galloped on treadmills for a mile. Now there's a good minor league baseball promotion. W.C. Fields, John Philip Sousa and Al Jolson are among those who appeared at the theater.

A \$10 million hotel renovation was completed in April. I was impressed with the newly renovated Thurber's Library Bar. The walls are lined with eight original prints from author-cartoonist Thurber, who was from Columbus. He stayed at the hotel when visiting his hometown and was seen tipping a few in the hotel bar while doodling and penning notes to himself. He had a favorite window-side table.

I brought along my paperback copy of Thurber's 1933 memoir *My Life and Hard Times*. Before I went to sleep I re-read his wonderful short story about the night the bed fell on his father in Columbus. My dreams were sweet and modest, which might not have occurred after a visit to Yankee Stadium.

