

Aug. 9, 2009----

GREENVILLE, S.C,--- The American south is pretty good at myth making.

Like snowballs down a mountain, Elvis Presley, Brett Favre and Hank Williams all rolled out of these parts. And now the growing community of Greenville (pop. 76,000) has turned to Shoeless Joe Jackson as a tourist attraction.

In April 2006, the red brick home in which the legendary White Sox lived and died was dismantled and moved to across the street from Fluor Field, the beautiful new stadium of the Greenville Drive, the Boston Red Sox' Class A affiliate.

The home opened as the Shoeless Joe Jackson Museum & Baseball Library in June, 2008. The house is at 356 Field Street -- in honor of Jackson's .356 lifetime batting average, the third highest in baseball history. A life-size bronze statue of Jackson has been erected downtown in the Joe Jackson Plaza. The statue base is made from original bricks salvaged from Comiskey Park.

Fans leave autographed baseballs and lucky pennies at Jackson's humble gravesite in Woodlawn Cemetery on the near northeast side of town.

If the shoe fits, wear it.

Just as Elvis used music to break out of Tupelo, Miss., Jackson played baseball to get out of the Greenville textile mills. Museum curator Arlene Marcley said a major movie star is working with the museum on a major motion picture on Jackson's life.

Jackson has a place in American folklore for his involvement -- or lack of involvement -- in the Chicago Black Sox scandal.

After the White Sox allegedly threw the 1919 World Series, in which Jackson batted .375, baseball commissioner Kenesaw Mountain Landis banned Jackson and seven of his teammates from the game for life after the 1920 season.

Jackson was born in Pickens County, S.C., and grew up in the Greenville textile community of Brandon. He began playing for the Brandon Mills team in 1901 at the age of 13. The field still exists. It is now the Shoeless Joe Jackson Ball Park. The mostly vacant Brandon Mill in which Jackson worked stands tall behind the first base line.

The two-bedroom, one-bath Jackson home is filled with sweet spots. Jackson and his wife Kate lived in the 950-square-foot-house-turned-museum from the time it was built in 1940 until his death in 1951. The woodwork, doors and windows are all original. Guests do not have to remove their shoes before entering the original dining room. After all, Joe was only shoeless for a while.

"He was wearing new cleats in the seventh inning of a double header against the Anderson Electricians," said Marcley. "He had blisters and took his shoes off. He hit a triple and a fan yelled, 'You shoeless son-of-a-gun.' A reporter heard it and the next day 'Shoeless Joe Jackson' was in the Greenville News."

A former screened porch has become a research center. Fans have donated more than 1,000 baseball-related books to the library. The paneled room features a replica desk and chair of the set that the illiterate Jackson kept in a corner of the room. Marcley said visiting scouts often visit the research center and plop down at the table and chair.

Visitors learn that Jackson had a pet parrot named Robert E. Lee whose vocabulary was limited to screeching: "Yerrrrr out!"

The living room features rare Jackson photos such as his wedding picture and memorabilia such as a wooden chair with woven seat in which someone carved in the initials "J.J." Jackson died of a heart attack in the home's master bedroom. The bathroom contains the original tile, tub and sink.

One of the most compelling pieces in the house is a letter from Ted Williams endorsing Jackson's enshrinement into the Baseball Hall of Fame. Williams wrote how Jackson "served his sentence with dignity and pride."

"The movement is picking up steam," Marcley said. In 2007 the Chicago History Museum won an auction of a foot-high stack of Black Sox papers. They are available to the public.

Marcley is a retired executive to Greenville Mayor Knox White. When she started with White in 1995 she began fielding requests from visitors about Joe Jackson. It piqued her interest and she became a student of his life. "It's a story about an American injustice," she said. "That's what resonates with so many of our visitors. They're all supporting the underdog."

HERE IS TED WILLIAMS' LETTER IN SUPPORT OF JOE JACKSON

Dear Mayor White,

I join with you, all South Carolinians, and baseball fans of America on proclaiming this Shoeless Joe Jackson Month.

I'm sorry I cannot attend the ceremonies but my schedule is prohibitive at this time. Please realize the cause for Joe Jackson's reinstatement on the eligibility list by Major League Baseball is of the utmost importance to me. We feel much headway has been made toward this goal and the support of you and my other friends in South Carolina has not gone unnoticed.

It has been 80 years since Joe was accused, he served his sentence with dignity and pride and has all the credentials of a Hall of Famer.

Keep up the good fight.

Ted Williams