

Eskenazi, Gerald. *Bill Veeck: A Baseball Legend*. N.Y.: McGraw-Hill, 1988. Pp. 182.

The late Bill Veeck stands out in major league baseball history as a rare example of a beloved and heroic club owner. This is no small achievement since among the game's cast of characters clubowners generally appear as villains. For the most part owners have been stereotyped variously as profiteers, oppressors of players, publicity-seekers, and power-drunk "lords of baseball." More recently, the owner's greatest protagonist, Marvin Miller, has averred that owners are "unnecessary."

Indeed, owners have themselves to blame for their woeful public image. Like Jacob Marley, they forged their bleak reputational chain over many years. In the past century, after wresting control of the game from the players, owners like Von der Ahe, Spalding, Brush and Freedman fashioned early links in the long chain of ill-repute and the antics of men like Kroc, Finley, Turner and Steinbrenner have extended the chain in our time.

But maverick Bill Veeck, the late, lamented peripatetic club owner, is not to be counted in such company. His obvious love for the game and its fans, his imaginative promotional stunts, and his cutting and witty diatribes against his fellow establishmentarians stamp Veeck (like the legendary and usually starving elephant-eating mole) as a breed apart.

The son of a Chicago newspaperman who later became the executive officer of the Chicago Cubs, Veeck was nurtured for a career in baseball. Upon the death of his father in 1933, the 21-year old, mostly self-educated Veeck worked

in the Cubs front office until 1941. Striking forth on his own, Veeck launched his ownership career that year by acquiring the lackluster Milwaukee team of the American Association. A demon promoter, by dint of canny promotional schemes and judgment of player talent, Veeck lured fans who saw his revitalized team win three consecutive pennants. But during two of those victory years Veeck served as a Marine in the Pacific theatre where he suffered an injury that eventually cost him his right leg. The debilitating handicap, however, only goaded Veeck to rise to prominence in baseball,

In 1946 Veeck headed a syndicate which purchased the Cleveland Indians. As chief executive, in 1947 Veeck introduced Larry Doby as the first black player in the American League. The following year the Indians set a longstanding attendance record in winning the AL pennant and the World Series. It was the highlight of Veeck's career, but the following year Veeck sold his interest in the team. In 1951 he resurfaced as head of a syndicate which purchased the forlorn AL St. Louis Browns. Although Veeck boosted attendance, financial exigencies forced him to sell his interest in 1953. His brash capers, including playing a midget in a game in 1951, further alienated fellow owners who drove him into exile. But Veeck returned in 1959 at the head of a syndicate which purchased the Chicago White Sox. That year Veeck's team broke a skein of Yankee pennant victories by winning the AL pennant, but financial and health problems had Veeck selling out in 1961. A pariah among owners, but a hero to fans and baseball writers, Veeck was exiled again until 1976 when he surfaced at the head of yet another syndicate which purchased the White Sox and prevented the club's sale to outsiders bent on relocating the team. It was Veeck's last stint as a club owner. Thwarted by the new "moneyball" style of promotion, and plagued with mounting health problems, Veeck sold out in 1980. His death in 1986 was widely mourned.

The foregoing sketch outlines the career of Veeck as told by New York *Times* sportswriter Gerald Eskenazi in this brief biography. While the author grapples with Veeck's complex personality, Veeck's life and times are cursorily treated. Mostly the author is content to dance about his subject, relying mainly on newspaper accounts and interviews with people who knew Veeck. The interviews by no means are exhaustive as Veeck willingly interviewed many in his lifetime, including many not consulted by the author. The interviews used here are mostly laudatory, but sometimes critical, and will furnish historians with some useful insights. But on the whole Eskenazi's crisp effort is a preliminary diagnosis which will suffice until a more extensive evocation of Veeck's life and times is undertaken.

Among the books' weaknesses is a failure to shed light on the clubby world of major league baseball owners, whose incumbents and customs Veeck so often defied. Certainly Veeck himself evoked that world in two autobiographical works, *Veeck as in Wreck* and *The Hustler's Handbook*, and a pithy 1964 article entitled, "The Baseball Establishment." Of these, Eskenazi mentioned only the former, which he casually dismisses as an anti-Yankee and anti-Commissioner diatribe. As for Veeck's *Thirty Tons a Day*, a book which describes Veeck's

exilic stint as a racetrack operator, the reader learns little more than that the title refers to the daily weight of “road waffles” supplied by the steeds.

Moreover, the author’s main sources, mostly interviews, are listed under acknowledgements with no critical commentary. There is no bibliography, no index, and no photos. The ten blank pages at the end of the book could easily have housed an index and bibliographical listing.

A glaring factual error has Veeck advising Commissioner Landis in 1945 of his scheme to purchase the bankrupt Phillies and to stock that National League sickling with players purchased from the black major leagues. However, Landis was in his grave in 1945. The incident occurred early in 1943 before Veeck joined the Marines. In *Veeck as in Wreck*, Veeck relates how his offer was suddenly rejected. The bankrupt Phillies were sold to the NL for \$50,000 and the NL later sold the team to William Cox for half the sum Veeck’s syndicate had agreed to pay. Moreover, Veeck later told historian Jules Tygiel how he heard tell of NL President Frick boasting that he had prevented the brash Veeck from “contaminating” the League.

Such faults notwithstanding, this is a readable book. As such it should serve as a goad prompting a better one. For inspiration, a would-be biographer can avail of the same advice that Veeck once gave to bandleader Skitch Henderson; in Veeck’s upbeat words, “Get off your ass. Don’t let anybody push you around. What you can do, you can do and nobody can take it away from you.”

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