

“‘Say It Ain’t So Joe:’ The 1919 Black Sox Scandal.” Chicago Historical Society Exhibit. Clark Street at North Ave., Chicago, Ill. 60614. October 19, 1988 to June 11, 1989. Robert Goler, Curator.

The 1919 Black Sox affair, like an embarrassing hangover, was brushed under the carpet for the next forty or so years. The baseball establishment refused to acknowledge the scandal for what it was: a pivotal event in American urban history that was a symptom of a changing age. The events of 1919—growing post war cynicism, race riots, and accelerating industrialization signalled the death knell of the agrarian ideal. The Black Sox were a part of this tapestry.

Baseball thwarted attempts to dramatize the scandal on television in the 1950s. Eliot Asinof published *Eight Men Out* in 1963, but the experience was a jarring one. His little-known companion volume *Bleeding Between the Lines*,



Black Sox Exhibit. Courtesy, Chicago Historical Society.

discussed the frustrations of the writer attempting to bring this story before the American public. Then in 1987 filming began on the movie version of *Eight Men Out*. The sympathetic account directed by John Sayles, focused on George "Buck" Weaver, always considered the real scapegoat of the tragedy. "It wasn't simply that these were bad guys and this was how they did it," Sayles told Dick Johnson. "And they're not all necessarily bad. It was a very complex human situation."

Coinciding with the general release of *Eight Men Out* was the opening of "Say It Ain't So Joe: The 1919 Black Sox Scandal" in the Pauline Palmer Wood Gallery at the Chicago Historical Society. Except for cursory treatment of the event at the Baseball Hall of Fame, this was the first historical exhibit devoted to the Black Sox scandal. It was put together by Robert Goler, curator of Decorative and Industrial Arts, and it featured 250 items of baseball memorabilia from the period, replica uniforms designed for use by the cast members of *Eight Men Out*, enlarged game photos from the 1919 World Series, and a section of grandstand taken from present-day Comiskey Park. The eight month exhibition, which closed to the public on June 11, 1989 was supplemented by a weekly showing of *The Chicago White Sox: A Visual History*, an hour long video produced by Major League Baseball Films. The Society also scheduled a day long visit and tour of Comiskey Park.

The decision to highlight the Black Sox scandal had more to do with the opening of the movie than the anniversary of the event, or the Pete Rose troubles, according to Goler, who encountered more than the usual amount of difficulty locating authentic artifacts. The Chicago White Sox, like so many other Major League teams are bereft of archival material. The truly interesting pieces, like actual game equipment used by the players and correspondence between Comiskey, the players, attorneys, and the courts are in the hands of private collectors like Barry Halper of New York and Pat Quinn in Chicago who buy and sell baseball history much the same way as a commodities broker on the Mercantile Exchange deals in hog futures. It is the right of these men to earn their livelihood in this manner, of course, but few people outside friends and relatives will ever preview the vast collections they have amassed over the years. In fairness to Quinn and Halper, it should be noted that they loaned several items from their collection to this exhibit. The same could not be said of Comiskey's business correspondence which has been acquired by one Al Rosen of Florida who I understand, has opened the bidding at \$5,000. What if any new insights could have been gleaned by baseball scholars or the staff at the Historical Society if these papers were turned over for analysis? Regrettably, we will never know.

Given the constraints imposed upon him, Mr. Goler, who was assisted by designers Andy Leo and Virginia Heaven provided a flavor of the 1919 World Series and the tragedy that followed through words and pictures. The photographs of game day at Redland Field were vivid and unusual. The black and white images of the cozy little ballpark, encircled by residential buildings were supplemented by newspaper accounts. Unfortunately, in his desire to present

realism, Mr. Goler framed front page copies of the *Boston American*. Unable to locate extant pages of the *Chicago Tribune* or *Daily News*, he exhibited the Boston papers with wire account stories and box scores. In this instance a reproduction of the *Herald & Examiner*, for example, with game stories by Hugh Fullerton whose suspicions were awakened almost with the first pitch would have been desirable.

The stylish looking exhibit evokes the look and feel of the period. Designer Kevin Wolfe prepared a frieze that was modeled after the 1911 Plow Boy Tobacco card series. What is missing here, I'm afraid, are the more subtle dimensions. It is an oversimplification to hold Charles Comiskey entirely accountable for the player's decision to sell out to the gamblers. Though Comiskey's penury was certainly a contributing factor, the fact is baseball players had been warming up to the gamblers for years. Lost in the drama of the Black Sox Scandal was the fact that a Cub pitcher-Claude Hendrix—was the original target of the September 1920 grand jury.

Instances of fraternization between players and the men of the sporting fraternity dated back to before the turn of the century. In 1903 the Cubs played the White Sox to a fourteen game draw in the first City Series amidst charges that pitcher Jack Taylor was throwing games to the Sox. The case was thrown out for lack of evidence. In 1919 the Cubs released Lee Magee with a year to go on his contract. Magee was a confederate of the notorious Hal Chase a shadowy first baseman whose infamy dated back to 1905. According to historian Harold Seymour, Magee did not go quietly, vowing to "show up some people for tricks turned ever since 1906." What could all this mean?

The gambling syndicates of Chicago, New York, Cincinnati and other large industrial centers were well defined. They were the essence of organized crime in the pre-Prohibition period. In Chicago, Mont Tennes was the czar of the racing wire which distributed racetrack information to thousands of subscribing poolrooms across the nation. James O'Leary, and a host of small fry's battled Tennes for control of territories much the same way as Al Capone did fifteen years later against Bugs Moran. In New York, Arnold Rothstein, "Lil Augie" Orgen, Jack Zelig, and their minions had things pretty much the way they wanted. The prelude to the Black Sox Scandal, and the infiltration of the gamblers into what was once the "cleanest of all sports" and the events of the 1920 season were pivotal themes, but largely ignored by both John Sayles and Mr. Goler. Director Sayles could not fit it into a two hour movie, and the Chicago Historical Society lacked the floor space. As a result the Black Sox scandal is treated as an isolated event, which was certainly not the case.

The human side of the tragedy—the presumed innocence of George "Buck" Weaver is poignantly captured in this exhibit by the sad, but pathetic letter to Ford Frick. As late as 1953 Weaver, who was working as a pari-mutual clerk at a Chicago race track, was pleading for reinstatement into the game he loved.

Jan. 29, 1953

Mr. Commissioner,
Dear Sir:

I signed acontract in 1919 for three years. I played ball for Comiskey 1919 and 1920 until the last three games of 1920. Then I was suspended for doing something wrong. Which I knew nothing about. I played the 1919 World Series and played a perfect series. I also hit around .340. I stood trial and was acquitted. You know commission (sic) the only thing we have left in this world is our judge and the jurors and they found me not guilty. They do some funny things in baseball. Mr. commissioner (sic) I filed suit for my 1921 contract. But commission (sic) they settled for my 1921 contract that makes me right and Comiskey wrong. So commission (sic) I am asking for reinstatement into organized baseball.

Yours very truly,
George Buck Weaver
7814 S. Winchester
Chicago, Ill.

The letter was located in the commissioner's office after some expert sleuthing by Bob Goler and his staff. It has since gone to the Hall of Fame for display. The Black Sox Exhibit was an ambitious undertaking for the Chicago Historical Society. Actual work began in January 1988 and it opened the following October. This is rather quick for a large loan exhibition, particularly one that required significant conservations. After seventy years the Black Sox Scandal is finally out of the closet, permitting historians and casual baseball fans to engage in informed debate. It is certainly long overdue, and John Sayles and Bob Goler are to be commended for their fine efforts.

The Fall/Winter 1988-89 issue of *Chicago History Magazine*, the official publication of the Chicago Historical Society is available by mail for \$5.75 which includes postage and handling. A twenty-eight page photo essay on the 1919 Black Sox Scandal with forty black and white illustrations, interpretive text, and a color cover of the "Eight Men Out" is featured in this issue. Send checks to: Museum Store, Chicago Historical Society, Clark Street at North Ave., Chicago, Il. 60614.

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Richard Lindberg