

Film, Media, and Museum Reviews

Museums

The Pro Football Hall of Fame. 2121 George Halas Drive, Canton, OH 44708. Joseph Horrigan, curator; Peter Fierle, film librarian. (216) 456-8207.

The Pro Football Hall of Fame is both a shrine to those who have played a significant role in the National Football League and the nation's attic for the storage of the material culture associated with professional football. The use of the term "shrine" is particularly appropriate. The principal building in the Hall of Fame complex is actually shaped like half a football standing with the pointed end up. Inside the "football" and the attached building is a nicely designed two story space for exhibits, offices, gift shop, and library. The dome created by the "football" contains stained glass skylights which at first glance give the impression of a cross. The cathedral ceiling dome shelters a larger than life statue of Jim Thorp. The effect is reverent but also a little whimsical, yet it works well for an entrance.

The concept of The Pro Football Hall of Fame was conceived in December of 1959 when a headline in the Canton *Repository* proclaimed that "Pro Football Needs a Hall of Fame and Logical Site is Here." The community immediately accepted the challenge and began organizing the effort to insure that the idea was realized. The cost of the project was estimated to be \$350,000. The Timken Company donated \$100,000 and the City of Canton donated the land. In April of 1961, the NFL owners voted to approve the project. More than enough money was raised to begin the project. Less than four years after the original proposal, on September 7, 1963, the Hall was opened with the enshrinement of seventeen charter members.

The initial construction consisted of two buildings with 16,000 sq. ft. for offices, storage and display areas. The Hall of Fame proved so popular that two additions were constructed over the next fifteen years. The first addition included a 350 seat movie theatre and a research library. The current facility consists of four buildings with a total of 51,000 sq. ft. There are plans for a third addition.

Three reasons are generally offered for the selection of Canton as the site for the Hall of Fame. First, the National Football League was founded there in 1920. Second, the Canton Bulldogs provided a strong link to the early days of both professional football and the NFL. Finally, the citizens of Canton orchestrated a determined and well-organized effort to claim the Hall of Fame as their own.

A major feature of the Hall of Fame is the twin Enshrinement Galleries. Each member is honored with his own niche, a bronze bust and a brief description of his



Statue of Jim Thorpe in the Professional Football Hall of Fame. Courtesy of the Professional Football Hall of Fame.

football career. While this type of display is generally less appealing to me, I was impressed and found myself lingering in these dimly lit galleries longer than expected. I was surprised at the memories, some vivid, stimulated by this simple display.

In addition to the Enshrinement Galleries, there are four exhibition areas. My favorite area is known as the Rotunda. The Rotunda is reached by walking up a spiral ramp into the cathedral-like dome created by the "football." The ramp seems to wind around the 7-foot statue of Jim Thorpe and ends on a second floor balcony. This display provides a roughly chronological glance at the history of professional football. A continuous display is located along the curved outside wall with a number of interesting displays located along the railing overlooking the main entrance. Defining professional as being paid to play the game, we are first presented with what is believed to be professional football's birth certificate—a ledger sheet from the Allegheny Athletic Association documenting the fact that Pudge Heffelfinger was paid \$500 .00 "for playing" against their rival the Pittsburgh Athletic Club on November 12, 1892. This does not ignore the fact that players had received payments for expenses previous to this date nor does it claim that no one was ever paid to play before this date. The claim is simply, and wisely, that this is the earliest documented case.

From this point on we are presented with a number of interesting and unusual artifacts that make museums both informative and entertaining. We look over Jim

Thorpe's shoulder at a mural of a 1916 Columbus vs. Canton football game. We see the full uniform worn by Harry Mason of the Syracuse Athletic Club in 1902. His headgear looked like an early version of a wrestler's headgear with an interesting codpiece-like device covering his nose and mouth. There is a beautiful trophy made of anthracite coal by and for the Pottsville Maroons in 1925 when they declared themselves NFL and World Champions after being denied the official titles. A bass drum used by the Baltimore Colts Marching Band from 1947-1965 provides us with evidence of the precarious position and the fierce loyalty of fans who march on even though their team marches out of town. A variety of equipment is on display showing the evolution of the football, helmet and shoulder pads. We see Ben Agajanian's "toe-less" shoe that kicked 655 points and the nearly "foot-less" shoe worn by Tom Dempsey when he kicked his amazing 63-yard field goal for the New Orleans Saints in 1970. Other interesting displays are about achievements rather than objects. One example is a display of the players (only three) who won three statistical championships in one season (Sammy Baugh led the NFL in passing, kicking and interceptions in 1943). Fortunately, the Rotunda is round and visitors can take a few laps before moving on.

The other three exhibition areas are the Pro Football Photo Art Gallery, the Pro Football Adventure Room and the Super Bowl Room. All three of these areas have something of interest and value, but as a whole they do not measure up to the Rotunda. The Photo Art Gallery honors the winning photographers from an annual contest open to professional photographers assigned to cover NFL games. While I was not impressed by this display, there is a near life-sized blow up of Morris Berman's classic 1964 photograph of Y. A. Title on his knees in the opponent's end zone, helmet in his hands and blood on his bald head.

The best display in the Adventure Room is "the Black Man in Pro Football." This display recognizes four men who played before 1920, thirteen who played between 1920 and 1933 and then a panel devoted to some of the black men who broke into professional football after WWII. This is an interesting and necessary display although some people might be offended by the statement that blacks "mysteriously disappeared" from the NFL from the 1934 season until the 1946 season.

The Super Bowl Room is cluttered with three large displays. One is a capsule history of the NFL including a nice presentation of the most successful of the four American Football Leagues. This is a part of the American Football Conference display and gives a little recognition to the AFL's status as perhaps the most successful challenger to an established "major" league in the history of professional sport. Another area features a brief display from each of the Super Bowls which might be more interesting to me if my favorite team had ever played in one. The third area is the enshrinees' memento room. Each team has a display honoring, with photos and mementos, its former players enshrined in the Hall of Fame.

The Hall of Fame also includes a research library. The library is opened to accredited writers and researchers by appointment. Responses to written and

telephone inquiries are handled with enthusiasm. Requests for material are handled in a timely fashion with reasonable fees charged only when necessary.

Currently, the library maintains files on all NFL players who have appeared on a team roster. Photo files are maintained for teams and players. All press releases, media guides and annuals published by each team are on file along with all record books, draft, trade and salary records. Some periodicals are in the collection—a complete *Sports Illustrated* and other football, general interest and history oriented sports periodicals. The staff is attempting to collect one copy of every book published about football. The film library contains all of the material produced by NFL films.

If there is to be any criticism directed toward the research library, it would be that it is too NFL oriented. Information about other professional football leagues seems to be minimal or nonexistent (nothing about the WFL, USFL or Arena Football, for example). There also seems to be little attempt, although I can appreciate the difficulty, to add team and NFL business records to the archive. The staff might, however, be a valuable resource to scholars seeking this kind of information. If The Professional Football Hall of Fame is to be “THE” resource concerning professional football these areas should be addressed in the future.

The Pro Football Hall of Fame is an enjoyable and informative place to visit and a significant cultural resource. Most of the displays are colorful and clearly presented. There is a broad range of materials presented covering a period of more than one hundred years. While I have no desire to detract from the quality of the displays, a number of ideas come to mind. The value of several displays could be enhanced with some simple changes. Some areas seemed too crowded to hold the visitors’ attention (in the Super Bowl Room, for example, I missed the AFL display on my first visit). The display of helmets and other equipment would benefit from more information about the time frame, the intention of the innovation, its effectiveness and any unexpected results (when did we need a face mask penalty, for example). It might be fun to dress up two mannequins as Jim Thorpe in 1915 protective equipment and Dick Butkus in 1970 equipment to show the contrast. The display honoring officials would be improved if we could get a better idea of the evolution of their role and of the rules, and if we could somehow see the game from their perspective. One last suggestion would be for a new display, even a room. There is a small display honoring athletic trainers, but the Hall of Fame is also a museum. I think devoting a room to strength training methods and equipment along with methods of preventing, caring for and rehabilitating injuries from the 19th century on would be both fascinating and educational. A Spielbergian display in this room might give the visitor an idea of the speed of a 4.3 40, the height of a 38" vertical jump, the strength of a lineman, maybe even a quarterback’s view of “Too Tall” Jones coming in at full speed, arms extended, three feet off the ground, ready to hit. The necessity of flack jackets and 4th string quarterbacks might also be explained.

Youngstown State University

John Neville