

Bill Veeck, The Press and the Glory Years in Cleveland

JAMES E. ODENKIRK

Arizona State University

The post-World War II era (1946-49) in Cleveland has been remembered in the city's sports annals as the time when Bill Veeck, then 32 years old, limped on the scene and took control of the Cleveland Indians baseball franchise. His reign in Cleveland was short – a mere 3½ years but neither the Indians nor the sport of baseball were quite the same thereafter. Neither, for that matter, was the city.

Veeck and Cleveland made a perfect marriage. Cleveland was a bustling city and then the sixth largest in the nation. World War II had just ended. People wanted to have a good time and Veeck fit right in as he choreographed the action.

Veeck set about developing a winning team. But he knew it would take time and he needed the support of the press. The three newspapers in Cleveland competed vigorously for an edge in readership. The major sports writers were Gordon Cobbledick of the *Plain Dealer*, Franklin A. “Whitey” Lewis and Frank Gibbons of the *Cleveland Press*, and Ed McAuley of the *Cleveland News*. Veeck gained their friendship and support and they became part of a social group which met frequently and were known as the “Jolly Set”.

The press generally reacted favorably to Veeck's promotional antics. The fans responded and attendance increased dramatically as the Indians became a pennant contender. It was fun to go to Cleveland Stadium and the press was swept up in Veeck's plethora of promotions and innovations.

The press did not always agree with Veeck's efforts to build a winning team. For example, Veeck drew the ire of fans and press when he attempted to trade popular shortstop Lou Boudreau to the St. Louis Browns for Vernon Stephens. However, his acquisition of players such as Joe Gordon, Larry Doby (the first black player in the American League), and Leroy “Satchel” Paige met with general approval from the press.

Veeck's efforts culminated in a World Championship for the Cleveland Indians in 1948, their first championship in twenty-eight years. The Indians set a major league record for attendance drawing 2,620,000 fans through the turnstiles. Veeck remained principal owner of the Indians through the 1949 season when the team finished in third place but still drew 2,223,000 fans. It was now time for Veeck to move to a new venture and he sold the Indians in the fall of 1949.

Veeck built a winning team in Cleveland and part of his success was his ability to play the media like a violin. Cobbledick, closest of the sportswriters to Veeck, explained the feelings of the press toward Veeck: “I'm immensely sorry that Veeck is leaving, but I'm glad he was here for those three and one-half years. He woke this town up as nobody ever did before and as no individual is likely to do in the foreseeable future.”