Remember the Black Sox?: The 1919 World Series Scandal and Social Memory

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As might be expected, much has been made of the allusion to the Black Sox scandal in F. Scott Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby (1925). Summarized briefly, after learning that the enigmatic gambler Meyer Wolfsheim was "the man who fixed the World Series back in 1919," Fitzgerald's Nick Carraway says, "I remembered, of course, that the World Series had been fixed in 1919, but if I had thought of it at all I would have thought of it as a thing that merely happened, the end of some inevitable chain. It never occurred to me that one man could start to play with the faith of fifty million people - with the single-mindedness of a burglar blowing a safe." Although it is certainly worth noting the symbolic importance that Fitzgerald attributed to the scandal, what interests me here is the process of remembrance, specifically the formulation of social memory. For Fitzgerald and his initial audience, the Black Sox scandal was a living memory, it still had some degree of immediacy. But as the years passed and the scandal faded in individual memories, how and why did the story of the fixed World Series remain active in American social memory? That is, in the years before the scandal was constructed in popular literature, history, and film, what forms - both written and non-inscribed - did it take? To what uses was it put, and by whom? If sociologist Maurice Halbwachs is correct and collective memory is socially

constructed and present-oriented, if it is an instrument of reconfiguration and not of retrieval, then what specifically was reconfigured by re-transmitting and re-remembering the story of the scandal?

There are numerous reasons why the memory of the 1919 World Series persisted in the 1920s and beyond. The scandal was arguably kept alive in the decades immediately following it by the presence of the banished players and the domineering visage of baseball commissioner Judge Kenesaw Mountain Landis, who was brought in by nervous team owners to restore order and to give baseball the appearance of integrity. It is also conceivable that the memory remained active because gambling interests continued to pose a threat to the integrity of the sport. Perhaps the memory endured because it was indeed a dramatic rupture with the past. The validity of these possibilities aside, in this paper I argue that another way of making sense of the scandal's continued presence in America's collective memory is to view it as a masculine narrative and phenomenon. That is, to view it as a story about men told by men to socialize young men and boys. From the very beginning, the scandal was recognized as a moment of crises for American masculinity. During the early twentieth century, Michael Kimmell argues, baseball, "as participatory sport and as spectator sport, served to reconstitute a [white middle-class] masculinity whose social foundations had been steadily eroding." The scandal no doubt negated any gains that that version of manhood may have accrued.