

BASEBALL DIGEST

★ SPRING TRAINING EDITION ★

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*By Abe J. Shear
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How timely it is that we remember Shoeless Joe Jackson, one of baseball's greatest players, a player not in the Hall of Fame even though he was acquitted of fixing the 1919 World Series. He, like Pete Rose, seems forever suspended, yet neither of them has been convicted of a baseball crime.

Today's Mitchell Report provides an interesting overlay. If the great players of the 1980's and 1990's go into the Hall of Fame, then what about Rose and Jackson? Conversely, if the basis for Rose and Jackson not being in the Hall was their association with an undesirable element, thus failing to honor the best interests of baseball, why should guilt or innocence be the standard for today's seemingly muscle bulging players?

Without a doubt, Shoeless Joe Jackson was one of baseball's greatest players, a simple southern boy playing in a very complicated world. Naïve and trusting, his name is enmeshed in baseball shame – yet his statistics and acquittal hold him guilty of nothing more than very poor judgment.

Hardly a hero, nor a villain, he equisitely played a boy's game. In this poignant interview, his niece and great nephew remember his kindness. Should Shoeless Joe be in the Hall of Fame? If nothing else, he should be treated no better nor worse than today's sullied and misguided steroid popping icons.

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Jerry Suddeth “I Remember Shoeless Joe”

Abe: Thanks for taking time to visit. Tell me about your first memories of baseball.

Jerry: I grew up in a little mill village called Woodside Mills. Mostly the mills had what they called a little recreation zone and that's where all of the kids congregated while their parents worked in the mill. You always played football, basketball and baseball. So, somewhere around when I was seven years old there was an organized league. We would play the teams from the other cities, not a pee-wee, probably a little bit above a pee-wee league as you would think of it today.

Woodside Mills was outside of Greenville or in Greenville?

In Greenville. Let me give you an idea what the Greenville School District did back then.

Back in like 1940?

40's, early 40's. The Greenville School District redistricted cotton mills and they called it Parker District and they drew lines such that all the mills went to this one school, and all the rest of us went to the city schools and they actually had a mill right next to Greenville High School but they drew the lines such that the mills kids had to go to Parker all the way across town. But essentially it was in the City of Greenville, right next to a little community called West Greenville and it's a little town, you know. It had a barber shop, pool hall and that's where my uncle's liquor store was in this community.

And when you were a child and you played baseball, what position did you play?

Second base.

Who taught you how to play?

Usually the athletic director of the recreation center at the mill, you know. He would be the coach. That's where I learned how to play baseball.

Mrs. Suddeth, what are your first memories of Shoeless Joe? [Note: Mrs. Suddeth is Jerry's mother.]

Frances: I was born in 1920, so I was not aware of the scandal until years later. My family lived at Brandon Mill and Uncle Joe would come to Greenville to visit as his wife Kate's family also lived in Greenville. I remember Uncle Joe visiting. I did know that he was a "Hero" at Brandon and at the other Mill Villages.

Jerry, I know we are going to get to your uncle in a bit, but did your uncle ever play ball with you or did he ever teach you to play or talk to you about playing?

Yes. I would visit him quite often in his liquor store. All the kids would go up to West Greenville and walk around. I knew that if I went to see him I'd get an ice cream because he would always take me to get an ice cream every time that I came. So, I learned at an early age that going to see him had its benefits of getting something and that's the way I got to know him. But to answer your question, I would go to his house sometimes and have lunch and he'd give me a few instructions on hitting, not much instruction on fielding, and I'd throw the ball with him back and forth and stuff like that, but he would try to give me some hints on what to do in the hitting area.

Did he like talking baseball? Did he like throwing the ball with you?

Oh yeah, he enjoyed talking baseball. At that time, I didn't know enough to ask, you know, questions, detailed questions about the major leagues. I knew he had played in the major leagues and my concept of the major leagues, of course, were the Yankees and the Dodgers and the Cleveland Indians and the Detroit Tigers

meat, biscuits). He asked her not to tell Kate, but I think she knew what was going on.

Now when you walked into his house, could you tell that he played baseball? Was there anything baseball out there?

He had a lot of the trophies and the memorabilia, his bats, you know, things

to some of those games. He just liked to watch baseball.

You said your favorite team was the Yankees. This was sort of an odd time for the Yankees. They were sort of in between players, except for DiMaggio. Who were your favorite players when you grew up?

Well, DiMaggio. I guess after that you came into the Whitey Ford and the Yogi Berra and the Mickey Mantle-type people.

Did you collect memorabilia growing up, baseball cards?

No, no, I sure didn't. I wish I had but, you know, I was one of those kids that was interested in other things. (Laughter) Looking for girls and playing high school sports, you know. In a mill town, that's about all there was, that and the school that I went to, that was about your life.

Now, there was certainly no Major League baseball in the South back then, but, you know, you sort of grew up with baseball all around you, certainly with your uncle. Do you remember the first Major League game that you went to?

You know, I believe it was the Atlanta team.

When they came to Atlanta?

Yes. Up until then, I went to exhibition games. The exhibition teams were traveling through. But I cannot remember who it was.

After your uncle was out of baseball, did he ever go back and watch major league baseball? Do you remember?

I don't know, but my grandfather was an avid sports guy. I know that I would go to his house a lot.

I know that after your uncle, Shoeless Joe, was out of baseball, out of organized baseball, he did a tremendous amount of barnstorming. I'm guessing he did his barnstorming before, really before you were old enough to watch. What stories were handed down between your family about the barnstorming?

I guess the only thing that I can remember was the story that they would change his name when he would come into town. They would change his name so that neither he nor the other players would be ineligible. It was mostly in South Georgia, Macon and those teams down in that area. One time he played for a dry cleaning company and they say they would change his name around so that nobody would know who he was.

"He always loved to play baseball."

and the White Sox and the Cubs. But now I can't even name the dad gum teams, the players move around so much. I would talk to him about playing. He always took the positive side. "Well, I had a great time," he would tell me.

Did he talk about his days in baseball?

Frances: He always loved to play baseball. He talked about the excitement of big league baseball crowds and big cities. He was very young when he played at Brandon and wanted to win all the time. He said he enjoyed playing in the Minor League also.

Did he talk about the teams that he was on? Did he talk about the travel that he did or the players that he played with?

He loved to travel. He said he really liked to travel because that was, I guess, his major means of transportation back then, but if I can remember correctly, he said he dearly loved playing baseball. That was one of his passions in his life. I guess if you're good enough the passion is always there. Some people are not good and never make it in the major leagues. I don't know which comes first, you know, the talent or the passion.

What are her favorite memories of Shoeless Joe?

Frances: He loved kids. His liquor store was located in West Greenville, a small town where people from Brandon, Woodside, Judson shopped. It was the place where kids of all ages came to. Uncle Joe would always take kids to the café near his store and buy them ice cream or something.

He never had children and I think this is why he was kind to kids.

He loved to eat. Kate put him on a diet and he was hungry all the time. My mother would fix him a big breakfast (eggs, grits,

like that. I'm trying to go back to when I was eight or nine years old and picture that. I wish that he had lived a little longer, because I did play baseball in high school. I really wish that I'd had him around at that time.

Now, can you ever remember listening to any of the ballgames with him on the radio?

No, I don't remember that. He did talk about the game, you know, and at that time you know, the White Sox.

When you grew up, did you listen to the game on the radio?

We used to listen to it.

Who were your favorites?

The Yankees. Hell, they won everything. You always wanted to pull for a winner.

They did win. They won pretty regularly.

Yes, they did.

Did Greenville have a Minor League team then?

Yes. My dad was in the military. He came back out of the war and worked in the mill and it was during that time that he would take me to the ballpark and my mom would go sometimes and my Uncle Joe went. I know a lot of times they would recognize him over the P.A. system and so on and so forth and have a Joe-Jackson night. I did love to go see the Minor League teams play.

Your Uncle Joe, he embraced Greenville and Greenville pretty much embraced him. I mean, it was a little town and he was part of that.

Yes. His brother, my grandfather Gary, was a pretty good ballplayer. You know, the mills had teams from the kids to the middle school age to the high school to grown people and my grandfather was very active in the Woodside League. He played and pitched, he coached, he managed and my Uncle Joe would come

What brought him to Greenville?

You know, I don't know. My grandfather and he were very close. I mean, when I would go in the liquor store, I would always see my grandfather and I didn't know what he did for a living. I know he worked in the mills during the war and all that good stuff, but they were very close.

Was it a liquor store or was it sort of a liquor store and community center?

It was a liquor store. Strictly liquor. People hung out there all the time. I mean, you couldn't go in that place and not see three or four people sitting and talking and carrying on.

And that was pretty much what Shoeless Joe did, I guess?

He probably had enough money. I don't think he did it for a living. He just wanted some place, something to do.

He was not terribly old when he died.

It was in '51 and he was born in what, 1885?

Do you remember anything about that?

I do not. I think he was the oldest in the family, the oldest child, but, to be honest with you, I don't remember.

I would have thought that would be a pretty big story in Greenville.

Well, it had to be a big story.

What was the funeral like?

Frances: Lots of family. Many people from newspapers were there.

I know that there's a lot of legend between your uncle and Ty Cobb. What light can you shed on that other than the fact that both of them were probably pretty stubborn guys?

He did mention one time about it was the best year he ever had and he still couldn't win the batting title. Ty Cobb

been pretty happy. I mean his lifetime batting average was a not so paltry .356. He was just, you know, one of the greatest baseball players that ever played. Now, I know before we did the interview, we spent a fair amount of time looking at the memorabilia. Tell

Frances: He didn't talk to the newspapers. Aunt Kate (his wife) was very protective. Later in years, he gave some interviews. The sports page editor Scoop Latimer ("Greenville News") was helping to get Uncle Joe into the Hall of Fame or to clear his name, I don't

"I would like to see him remembered as one of the great ballplayers in baseball history."

me how all that came about? There are two tremendous books of pictures and letters and telegrams.

It was my understanding that when my Uncle Joe passed away, my Aunt Kate had everything and she gave my Uncle Joe's youngest sister, Gertrude, all of the scrapbooks and a lot of the cups and the trophies as it was. She kept the gloves and the balls and the bats and things and before she passed away, she gave a lot of that to her nephew on her side of the family. I just saw where one of those guys put the bat up on ebay for sale. Now, I have the scrapbooks. My aunt had those scrapbooks for years and we would go through them, but she didn't know what to do to preserve them and then, when she died, my mother got those books because my mother did take care of them when she was older. My uncle's other brother, whose name was Dave Jackson, he had a daughter named Joyce and she ended up with some of the trophies and the cups that were awarded, and I have access to those. She passed away in February of this year, but her husband and I are pretty good friends and he said he had all that stuff in the back room back there and he

remember which.

Now, I know some of the letters are kind of interesting. It just says Shoeless Joe and it has the city and the state with no address and it seemed to make it to him. I guess that wouldn't happen to just anybody. Of the stuff that's in there, what do you most enjoy looking at?

These are obviously fans and a lot of them say what happened to him was a tragedy, you know. They didn't put it into those words, but, you know, he should have never been banned from baseball. They said he should have been allowed to play out during the prime time of his career and there was a lot of that and a lot of sympathy for what happened to him and some of the things were from Sporting News. Sporting News was thanking him for sending his autograph to them so that they could use it and some people didn't even know him, but just writing letters to him. "I appreciate what you've done", "I used to watch you play", those kinds of things. It's interesting. There's a lot of letters in there that, you know, I guess people just used to watch him play and even after he was banned from baseball and playing in some of these leagues in Georgia. And you still see some of those letters - "good seeing you play".

The memorabilia is beautiful. If you could figure out a way to get a website together to put the stuff on it so that people could read it, it would be a really neat on-line museum which also would and could be interactive.

The pictures and particularly the envelopes and the quality of the letters and the telegrams are at a minimum poignant and sweet. They're historically interesting. They certainly could be made available to people on-line.

How would you like to see your uncle

"...it was the best year he ever had and he still couldn't win the batting title."

beat him out that year.

One year he hit .408 or .409, didn't he?

I guess, but I think Ty Cobb had two percentage points more or something in the same year. I can't remember.

Well, I don't know. He should have

wasn't going to let anybody get a hold of it, so I suspect that he may give that to his grandson or something, but those things my aunt gave them before she passed away to Joyce and my mother.

I assume that the family did its best to protect him from the media?

remembered?

I would like to see him remembered as one of the great ballplayers in baseball history and not just as somebody that took a bribe. Like you say, his statistics speak for themselves. You can't fault him for his abilities in baseball. People would almost have to remember what the mills were like in the turn of the century. Him playing baseball at 14 and 15 years old and being good enough to play with the grown men of the league. You know, they had to find things for these people in the mills to do to keep them occupied and they would have organized baseball leagues to play the different teams around the area and he was a very young guy and he played on the many baseball teams.

And I'm guessing he really never had very much education.

I think he went to work in the mill when he was a kid.

So, he was educationally unsophisticated.

Right, and I think I feel this because my Aunt Kate, his wife, handled all of the finances, correspondence and things like that. We had a scrapbook that had nothing but newspaper articles. She took the time to clip and paste and do all these things and guided, you know, and made arrangements on trips and things. At least that's what my mother was saying. She was the primary person to probably tell him what to wear and what day he was going on vacation and things like that. She was just his right hand man because he probably either didn't have time or was, you know, not capable of handling

these things.

Mrs. Suddeth, did Shoeless Joe talk about the Black Sox?

Frances: Uncle Joe never wanted to talk about the scandal or the trial. He said he never did anything to throw the games. He said he always tried to play to win.

Jerry, baseball is a child's game, a game we learn to play when one is very young. It would seem to me, as somebody that's very removed from the passion of your uncle, that regardless of the argument about what happened with the Black Sox scandal, you have to focus on his statistics and focus on his unbelievable baseball skills. You know, it's certainly something that people can know, should know, and probably even want to know. It seems to me it makes more sense for the family to focus on his accomplishments than to focus on the Hall of Fame argument that is likely to be perpetual.

Right. If you just went on statistics

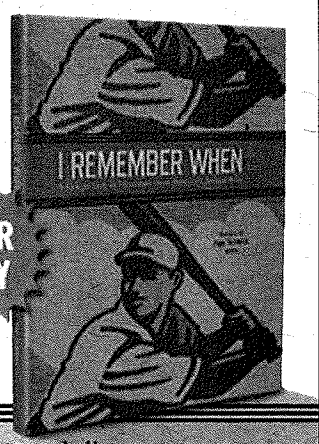
alone, he would be in the Hall of Fame, but because of that issue, who knows what's going to happen in the future.

I don't know if it's a debate. I don't know that being in the Hall of Fame is necessarily too sanctimonious any more. I mean, there are a lot of crummy people that are in the Hall of Fame, and apparently many more who will be in. Your uncle certainly was one of the greatest players ever, Hall of Fame or not. That will, perhaps, have to be good enough.

[Note: In thirteen seasons and 4981 at bats, Shoeless Joe hit .356. In 1919 he struck out but ten times in 516 at bats. For his career, he had 168 triples and 158 strike-outs! In 1918, he worked in the Chicago shipyards during part of World War I and played but 17 games. The Black Sox scandal unfolded in 1919 and 1920 when Shoeless Joe was grossly underpaid (making \$8,000) and near the end of his career.]

I Remember When is a beautifully designed hardcover coffee table book, including the first 35 interviews from Abe's Baseball Digests. The book is \$19.95 (plus tax and shipping) and can be purchased at www.irememberwhen.org.

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**Jerry Suddeth
"I Remember
Shoeless Joe"**

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