

## Fenway Park

Fenway Park is one of two original, old, wooden, baseball parks still standing in the country today. Sportsman's Park in St. Louis where I grew up was another, until it was torn down in the '60s. I first watched major league baseball there and worshipped my baseball heroes in style by visiting the ball park once or twice a year. In preparation for seeing the players in person, I would imagine being one of the great ones, by playing catcher on my little league team, the Osages, and collecting and flipping baseball cards containing pictures of baseball stars on one side and their stats, on the back.

Flipping baseball cards, was very popular in the '50s. You would hold a stack of cards in one hand and attempt to match the card of your opponent's, flipped to the ground, by flipping one of your cards with the other hand. The technique was to decide which side to hold against your fingers, how fast to flip the card, and how high above the ground to release your card. And, it always helped to put extra "English" on the final flip and grit your teeth as you released the card. If your card landed with the same side up as your opponent, whether picture side or back, you got to take his card. If your card didn't match his, he took your card. Sometimes, card flippers, could play for hours and end up with the same number of cards they started with. But, on other days, you could lose all your cards and then need buy more bubble gum packets which contained one or two baseball trading cards in each pack together with a flat piece of gum the size of the baseball card. The runs in luck while collecting baseball cards were like the winning and losing streaks of your favorite baseball team or the hit or no-hit streaks of your favorite player.

It was a thrill to drive to Sportsman's Park in St. Louis, park your car nearby in someone's yard for a buck (There were no parking garages in those days), and walk through the turnstile to the bleachers with a view of your childhood heroes warming up on an emerald-green field below. I first learned about baseball watching Stan Musial, Bob Gibson, Vinegar Bend Mizell, and Tim McCarver play and listen to Harry Carey announce the games on radio. Harry Carey's famous announcement of a home run as it occurred still excites me even today when I

remember him yelling, "It's a deep hit to right center field! It might be outa here! It could be, it might be, it is! It's a home run! The Cardinals take the lead!"

And, the activities in the stands were a whole new experience. To buy hotdogs or soda, everybody pitched in to help you get your food. The vender couldn't get close to the people in the middle of the rows, so he had to depend on his customers to help each other out. You would pass your money toward him down the row, and he would pass your change back, along with whatever you had purchased, except for peanuts and Cracker Jacks. Those, he would toss over the heads of the crowd, even if you were twenty or thirty feet away!

And, you could make as big a mess with the wrappers on your food as you wanted. It was considered good manners to throw your peanut shells on the floor of the stadium! One custom was a little hard for me to get accustomed to, however, because I didn't drink. At professional ball games beer was slopped around everywhere. The big breweries seemed to have a major stake in the game, based on the number and size of the beer commercials and signage around the park. In St. Louis, the major breweries were Busch and Budweiser. When anyone ordered a beer from a walk-around vendor, it was passed down the row, with gusto, and was frequently spilled onto you and your neighbors. It sometimes seemed that, the more beer that got splashed around, the better, even on the kids. Everybody got to go home smelling of beer, even if you didn't drink.

When visiting Boston in 1985, Daniel and I decided us guys needed to head downtown and see how baseball was played in Boston. We took the subway to Fenway Park (The subway is also known as the MTA). The Boston subway is famous due to a song by the Kingston Trio about Charlie, the man who never returned. He got lost on the MTA because he didn't have the fare to return to the surface again.

We went to see the Boston Red Sox play the New York Yankees. Of course, the Red Sox lost that night, as expected. The matchup between the Red Sox and the Yankees is probably the most famous rivalry in baseball. Boston had not won the World Series for many, many years until they finally prevailed in 2004, almost twenty years after we saw them play at Fenway.

The "Curse of the Bambino" was the reason! It was a superstition built on the failure of the Boston Red Sox to win the World Series in the 86-year period from 1918 to 2004. While some fans took the curse seriously, most used the expression in a tongue-in-cheek manner. This misfortune began after the Red Sox sold their star player, Babe Ruth, sometimes nicknamed "The Bambino", to the New York Yankees in the off-season of 1919–1920. Before that point, the Red Sox had been one of the most successful professional baseball franchises ever, winning the first World Series and amassing five World Series titles. After the sale, they went without a title for nearly a century as the previously lackluster Yankees became one of the most successful franchises in North American professional sports. The curse became a focal point of the Yankees–Red Sox rivalry over the years.

Daniel and I enjoyed the evening in Fenway Park together in the warm July evening, eating hotdogs, peanuts, and Cracker Jacks. We also enjoyed listening to the Boston accents and the raucous manner the "Bean Town" fans treated their sworn enemy from "The Big Apple." We also got to see two unique local landmarks of Fenway Park, "The Green Monster and the CITCO sign. The first is a large wall that rises directly above left field, preventing most long hits from leaving the Park and reducing the likelihood of home runs. Only the strongest hitters could lift the ball high enough to get over the top. And, beyond "The Green Monster" was the famous CITCO sign outside the Park on the far side of the street running past Fenway Park.

This sign became significant to our family because on the street directly below it my old 1969 Dodge station wagon chose to die one evening on the way back from a trip to the shore. I had to pay for a large taxi to transport our family of six and Jeannette's sister, Darlene's family of three, back to the Bentley College dormitories where we were all staying. Darlene and her two sons had come to Boston for a week to sightsee with us. This was how we treated them--nine family members plus the driver stuffed into one taxi for a 45-minute ride across Boston. So, every time I see a Red Sox game broadcast from Fenway Park in Boston, I get to relive the experience when I see the CITCO sign.

Daniel and I have enjoyed several major league baseball games together over the years, but this was probably the most memorable game because it brought back many memories of my childhood in St. Louis. I hope Daniel and I and my

grandsons get to see more baseball games, eat hotdogs, throw peanut shells on the floor, and hunt for prizes in Cracker Jacks boxes together.