

BASEBALL UNDER GLASS

True historian can own ‘Old Roman’s’ papers

*By George Castle, CBM Historian
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If you want to possess a chunk of the start of White Sox history, just contact Billy Kellens, a direct descendant of the American League co-founder who moved the White Sox to Chicago from St. Paul in 1900.

He'll be glad to talk – under one important condition. You must be appreciative of history and not in it for a strictly profit motive as a memorabilia collector.

What Naperville, Ill. pharmaceutical sales manager Kellens possesses are the letters and thoughts of his great, great grandfather — Sox founder Charles A. Comiskey (1859-1931). Kellens, ever loyal to the family team, ended up on the right side of a 1959-vintage family split as the holder of Comiskey's writings. Kellens himself worked for the White Sox as a visiting team clubhouse attendant and bat boy during the 1980s.

“I'm looking to see it go to someone to use it for the benefit of baseball,” said Kellens. “Museums, the Hall of Fame, so research can be done on it, and papers and books can be gleaned from it. The research is so great. It doesn't see the light of day very often. They're amazed by it. I've had some offers on it, but it was not going to a research person. It would have gone to a collector.”

According to Kellens' play-by-play of his heirloom, you'd acquire an amazing insight into the man who made the Sox the city's dominant team starting out the 20th century.

“I have personal notes and letters from 1908 and 1910,” Kellens said. “They are bound up in old scrapbooks. It's especially interesting with letters about building the original Comiskey Park (opened in 1910). There's a lot of stuff with the league, builders, the city. There are interesting interactions with other owners about players — this player wants to be traded, and so forth. There are a lot of different types of business in our pa-



Billy Kellens (left) possesses many of the papers of great, great grandfather Charles A. Comiskey (right).

pers. Some had to deal with (Comiskey's) boat down in St. Louis — I need this thing fixed on my boat type of letter.

“These include hand-written letters. They do have carbon copies. Post cards. All kinds of neat stuff. He was fantastic. It's amazing to see an old letter where you read the old cursive handwriting.

“It's so neat to see the different letters. You can see his personality come out.”

Letters paint true portrait of the man

A complete personality profile of Comiskey, the “Old Roman,” is merited. On one hand, he gets credit for founding the Sox and baseball innovations, such as when he pioneered playing off the bag as an active fielder in his late 19th century first-base days. On the other hand, Comiskey has been stuck with a longtime image as a tightwad prompting his best players to delve into the dark side to sell out to gamblers as the 1919 “Black Sox.”



Dorothy Comiskey Rigney (left), along with husband John Rigney, stored her grandfather's papers in her River Forest, Ill., home.

“He was very gracious, did a lot of charity work and gave a lot of tickets away to a lot of (local) groups and kids,” said Kellens. “He purchased mortgages for people around Comiskey Park. Those (Black Sox) players had free will; they were ones who did this. He paid market rate at the time to those players.”

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Kellens' grandparents were John Rigney and Dorothy Comiskey Rigney. His grandmother ended up with the Old Roman's collection, storing it in a “nice, non-humid dry place” in the Rigney's home in River Forest, Ill. Now, the papers are stashed in a temperature-controlled storage unit at a Harris Bank facility.

Comiskey, or one of his assistants, had preserved the material on the front end. The papers were bound after they were written.

Kellens is fortunate the papers were not entwined in contentious family history. Dorothy Comiskey Rigney and her brother, Chuck Comiskey, engaged in years-long litigation starting in the 1950s over the controlling interest in the Sox.

Bill Veeck swooped in to buy Rigney's share of the team early in 1959. Eventually, Chuck Comiskey sold out to Arthur Allyn, Jr. after Veeck bailed out in 1961. The ownership



The Comiskey scrapbooks

timeline led to John Allyn, Arthur's brother, and eventually back to Veeck late in 1975. In turn, Jerry Reinsdorf and Eddie Einhorn acquired the Sox from the financially-hampered Veeck in 1981.

"We saw them (the Chuck Comiskey side of the family) at the ballpark all the time, at the World Series and when the statue of Charles Comiskey was unveiled in the outfield," Kellens said. "We were always cordial. We were always pleasant with them. We didn't have family reunions, but there was no family animosity."

If Sox had the Cubs' wealth...

Chuck Comiskey and John Rigney did cooperate to build a consistent Sox contender in the 1950s serving as co-general managers. Former pitcher Rigney ran a productive farm system. Kellens agreed with the supposition that the family could have built a dynasty to overcome the Yankees had they possessed, say, Cubs owner Phil Wrigley's level of wealth.

"He signed Luis Aparacio and Minnie Minoso," Kellens said of Rigney. "The Sox had to be run from (team) revenues."

CBM President Dr. David Fletcher has seen the Charles A. Comiskey collection that Kellens has on the market.

"I have looked through the material and it is one of a kind," said Fletcher "What is of value in the collection that Bill is selling is the 1910 personal letters because it involves correspondence regarding the construction of Comiskey Park in 1910. There is also a private photo book of the 1913-1914 World Tour."

"Peter Alter, the curator from the Chicago History Museum, through my introduction, has looked at the material but so far has passed on purchasing the collection because of lack of funding due to other projects. I told him that since the Chicago History Museum (CHM) and Chicago Baseball Museum have passed so far with the first crack at bidding that I would help Billy to market this unique collection that is valuable history. It needs to go to a caretaker who will preserve the history. It needs to go to the right bidder that will make the material available to historians."

"I am unaware of any other personal Charles Comiskey papers ever being available before."

Fletcher said the Kellens collection greatly differs from the collection the CHM acquired from Maestro Auctions in December 2007. These papers were acquired for \$100,000 (the CBM was the runner-up bidder). They are not personal pa-



Chuck Comiskey sold much of his family memorabilia. Photo credit Leo Bauby.

pers of Charles Comiskey, but the legal file of White Sox attorney Alfred Austrian. The legal documents are related to the 1919 Black Sox team and the 1921 and 1924 related-trials.

“The collection obtained by the CHM mysteriously came on the market after Chuck Comiskey died in 2007,” Fletcher said. “The origin of how Maestro Auctions acquired these legal papers has been clouded with mystery.”

Fletcher said the Kellens collection is much more personal and does not have any material related to the 1919 Black Sox scandal. “It does, however, peek at the future of the scandal with Sox founder Comiskey offering future Baseball Commissioner Kennesaw Landis a season pass in 1910 when Comiskey Park first opened up. Comiskey certainly could not have foreseen that in 1921 Landis — after being named Commissioner in November 1920 — would destroy his team when he banned the Eight Men Out for eternity after a Chicago jury acquitted the players for conspiracy.”

Another generation in employ of Sox

Kellens has a special family bond with the team and old Comiskey Park.

“I spent many of my formative years sitting in the stands as well as working in the bowels of the ballpark as a clubbie and batboy in the visiting clubhouse” he said. “Every time I walked into the ballpark it was like the first time. The smell of fresh cut grass. The enormous field and scoreboard. The sights and sounds of baseball. The crack of the bat. The smell of hot dogs and the cheer of the crowd. The whole family was there at the last game at Old Comiskey Park. You couldn’t help but shed a tear or two. The ballpark that my great-great-grandfather had built in 1910 was set to be demolished.



A young Bill Kellens (left) gets together with grandfather John Rigney (right) in 1982.

“I hope the City of Chicago will continue to honor the memory of Charles Comiskey and the legacy he had in founding the Chicago White Sox, founding the American League (with Ban Johnson) and crossing racial barriers with support of the Negro League by having the East West Game in Comiskey Park from 1933-1960. Charles Comiskey made an indelible mark on the city of Chicago.

“The book ‘Eight Men Out’ was at the very least a stretch of the truth. New information has revealed that many of the characters in the book were fictional and put in the story to make Charles Comiskey look like a devious owner. This made the story more of a Hollywood fable than reality.”

The CBM did acquire in 2010 some personal papers of the late Charles Comiskey II (Dorothy Rigney Comiskey’s brother). Those materials included some rare Charles A.

Comiskey material, who was Charles Comiskey II's grandfather. These documents outlined well the generosity and philanthropy of the Old Roman.

The CBM acquired these papers directly in 2007 from Grace Patricia Ryan Samfillippo (1925-2009). In 2007, she was one of the last living people to work for the Chicago White Sox's first general manager Harry Grabiner. Samfillippo spent countless evenings nestled in the lap of Charles A. Comiskey as he riveted her with bedtime baseball stories. She was a direct living link to the Old Roman and his tremendous impact on baseball in America. Grace Patricia's grandfather was Patrick Henry Comiskey, older brother and confidant of Charles A. Comiskey.

Grace helped confirm the belief that Chicago-born Charles A. Comiskey believed he had cursed Comiskey Park and his franchise forever because he violated the Irish Catholic-based superstition about "Never on a Friday" when the park opened up on Friday, July 1, 1910.

Old-time ballplayers regarded it as bad luck to play their first home game of the season on Friday. The Friday superstition also played a prominent role in the Black Sox scandal according to J. L. Brown, who wrote "The Big Baseball Scandal" for *The American Mercury*, in May 1939. The White Sox players who conspired to toss the 1919 World Series all agreed early on about one thing: no money should be passed on a Friday.

The backstory of Charles A. Comiskey cannot be fully told with the collection Kellens possesses. But it's a good start in understanding the roots of an often star-crossed franchise.

If you are a serious potential bidder, contact Kellens via e-mail at BaseballPalace1910@gmail.com.

If you are the winning bidder, you will end up reading the private thoughts of the Old Roman himself.