

BASEBALL UNDER GLASS



Steve Dahl in all his glory revving up the crowd on Disco Demolition Night. Photo by Paul Natkin.

Eight-track player among the period pieces in Disco Demolition exhibit at Elmhurst History Museum

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Maybe it's just me, but my top highlight touring the Elmhurst History Museum's ode to Disco Demolition Night 38 years ago was not the treasure trove of period-piece items that included stuff pulled from protagonist Steve Dahl's storage locker.

Nor did they include White Sox catcher Mike Colbern's No. 19 uniform he wore for the evening of July 12, 1979 at Old Comiskey Park or the priceless Paul Natkin black and white photos taken during the wildest promotion in baseball history.

What toots my whistle are the vintage radios and TVs which help convey the Disco Demolition story step-by-step. Millennials mesmerized by Star Trek communicators-turned-all-purpose iPhones won't believe Baby Boomers had to consume much of their information via broadcast signals and recordings conveyed through the AM-FM radios, a retrofitted Seventies TV and an actual eight-track player complete with sample tape.



Catcher Mike Colbern's jersey from Disco Demolition (left) and an eight-track player are two of the top period pieces at the Elmhurst History Museum's exhibit.

All that was missing was a late 1970s 21-inch-plus Zenith console color TV – “the quality goes in before the name goes on” -- on which astonished viewers on the old WSNS-TV (Channel 44) would have watched Dahl blow up records, the mob of thousands storm the field and Harry Caray and Bill Veeck failing to restore order despite their best efforts.

In its second major Chicago baseball exhibit in the last three years, the Elmhurst museum again has done a lot with a little. Just off downtown Elmhurst, the museum has barely 1,000 square feet of exhibit space, but makes the most of it via the multi-media display. If you can pry yourself away from the Mitch Trubisky Bears soap opera and keep your attention on the contending Cubs and rebuilding Sox, the display will keep you in the right frame of mind through Dec. 31, its closing date.

Longtime curator Lance Tawzer went out with a bang. After Tawzer assembled a Cubs-Sox rivalry exhibit in 2014 with the assistance of the Chicago Baseball Museum, he recorded his final project for the Elmhurst institution with this clever time-trip before moving on up to a bigger job with the Naper Settlement in Naperville.

Tawzer did not just phone it in. He secured Dahl's cooperation and retrieved artifacts long consigned to his storage area. He worked with longtime writer Dave Hoekstra, a July 12, 1979 Comiskey Park attendee whose 2016 book chronicled all things Disco Demolition. Hoekstra wrote the narrative for the entire exhibit. Having already shown a collection of Natkin photos from that night at the museum, Tawzer re-integrated the photos into the exhibit.

The book morphed into the exhibit, hence its display on an oddball anniversary year for Disco Demolition. The actual 40th anniversary year was the creation of WLUP-FM (97.9), Dahl's station that promoted Disco Demolition, putting itself on the broadcast map like no other promotional beneficiary. WLUP is the broadcast sponsor of the exhibit.

“Lance was always looking for exhibits that had a broader appeal than just Elmhurst,” said Patrice Harrigan Roche, the museum's marketing and communication specialist. He had booked a winner with the Cubs-Sox exhibit, so popular it traveled to the Harold



Once the crowd stormed the field, Sox security and executives along with Harry Caray could not hold back the tide. Photos by Paul Natkin.

Washington Library in downtown Chicago before moving on to several other suburban museums and libraries.

Hoekstra writes book, museum narrative

“For our summer exhibits, we try to take maybe a slighter lighter look at history,” Roche said. “Dave Hoekstra has a got very folksy, endearing style. We know him really well. He had a lot of relationships from writing the book. But writing the book and writing the exhibit are not the same thing. The bottom line was we had to take some of the book research and ask how to tell the story from an exhibit.”

But the clincher was Tawzer gaining access to the Dahl archives. The mercurial deejay, now heard afternoons on WLS-AM (890), usually carried off some material from each of his many broadcast stops. But, overall, “he didn’t even know what he had in there,” Roche said.

Among vintage Dahl items were his trademark Hawaiian shirt, “Do You Think I’m Disco?” record and an Insane Coho Lips fan club membership card.

One Dahl object out of Tawzer’s reach was the military helmet he wore for Disco Demolition. For all the guff Bill and son/Sox promotions director Mike Veeck took, the pair have been redeemed—the baseball Hall of Fame is showing off the helmet via a five-year loan.

“I think Lance knocked it out of the park,” said Roche.

The exhibit, of course, could not cover every last angle of Disco Demolition. Tawzer and Roche did not know that weeks after the last Dahl fan was run off the field by Chicago police, Sox “Sodfather” Roger Bossard found some nine marijuana plants growing in the Comiskey Park outfield. Anti-disco partiers had literally seeded the field.

And one social/baseball aspect was omitted – although you’d have to be an expansive historian on baseball to have included it. Disco Demolition was virtually the last gasp for the 20th century habit of fans storming baseball fields in celebration of great feats

or, in the case of this night and 10-cent Beer Night in Cleveland in 1974, a promotion gone awry.

Only a little more than a year later, Philadelphia Phillies fans could have been excused for massing onto Veterans Stadium to celebrate their first World Series title. But a platoon of mounted Philly cops cantered onto the artificial turf quickly after the final out, preventing a mass incursion. Other cities adopted the non-sense policy. So scenes like thousands of Yankees fans storming the field for Chris Chambliss' 1976 American League pennant-clinching homer—with Chambliss fighting his way through the mob rounding third—were relegated to the past.

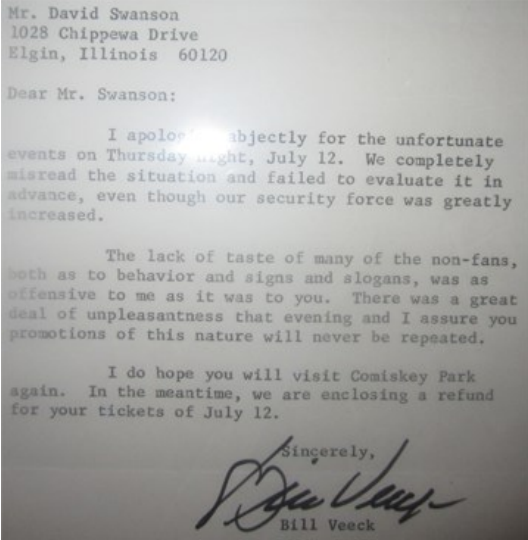
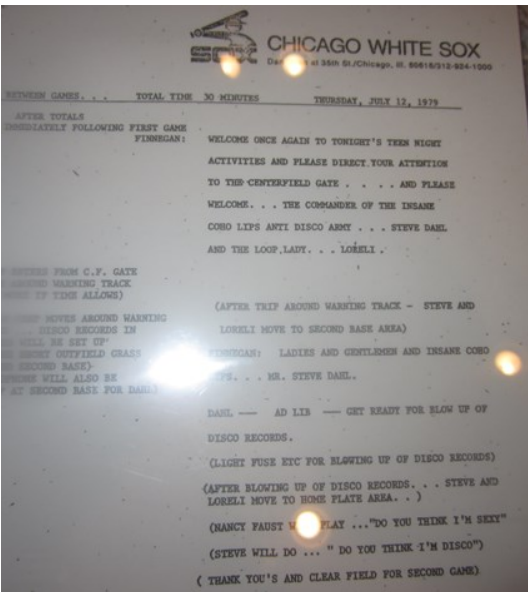
Dahl and his podcast fans showed up at a private party kicking off the exhibit. Hoekstra and Mike Veeck, who signed off on staging Disco Demolition and thus suffered career-wise for another decade, headed up a public session at the end of July.

“I think he was very impressed,” Roche said of Dahl. “He said this looks a lot better than in his garage. Steve’s a good guy. He’s a grandfather now, has his sixth grandchild. One of the reasons he did the book and the exhibit is he wants to put some of these things to rest. He said on the air he’s pretty sick of talking about it. He’s said everything he could about it.”

But on that summer night amid the Jimmy Carter presidency and proclamation of “national malaise,” Dahl unleashed something that won't die soon. Disco Demolition still is the best-remembered baseball promotion. Don Kessinger, then-Sox manager and Cubs legend, continues to proclaim that Disco Demolition was the best baseball promotion ever.

The present location of the exhibit likely will be the only place to reverse the calendar to 1979. With the highly-interactive nature of the displays, the exhibit cannot easily be dis-assembled and reconstituted in another location.

“You have to design the exhibit from the beginning that way to be a traveling exhibit,” Roche said, adding Dahl was not interested in the exhibit moving around and thus being pestered to appear again.



A Sox itinerary for Disco Demolition Night (top) and a Bill Veeck letter of apology to a fan are among the documents on display at the Elmhurst exhibit.

Admission is free. Hours at the 120 E. Park Ave. location, easily accessible about two miles off the Interstate 294 interchange with North Avenue, are 1 to 5 p.m. Sunday and Tuesday through Friday, and 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Saturday. For more information, visit www.elmhursthhistory.org/316/Current-Exhibits or call 630/833-1457.