



Impartial arbiter, new Hall of Famer O'Day was slanted to Chicago in personal life

*By George Castle, CBM historian
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For a man who wore an impenetrable mask of reserve behind his umpire's headgear, Hank O'Day sure wore his heart on his sleeve when it came to his native Chicago.

O'Day was serious he only allowed his few close friends to call him "Hank." He was "Henry" to most others in his baseball travels as one of the greatest arbiters ever. But in a Chicago he never left as home, he could be himself.

Born July 8, 1862 in Chicago as one of six children of deaf parents, O'Day always came back home and lived out his life in the Second City. He died July 2, 1935 in Chicago, and was buried in the lakefront Calvary Cemetery, just beyond the north city limits in Evanston. In between, he first played baseball competitively on the city's sandlots with none other than Charles Comiskey, the founding owner of the White Sox. And in taking one of a pair of season-long breaks to manage a big-league team amid his three-decade umpiring career, O'Day was Cubs manager in 1914, two years after he piloted the Cincinnati Reds for one year.

Through all of that, his greatest connection to his hometown was one of the most famous calls in baseball history – the "out" ruling at second base on New York Giants rookie Fred Merkle in a play that led to the last Cubs World Series title in 1908. Although O'Day knew the rule book like a Bible and called the play correctly, there's a theory he could have been slanted based on his different call in the same situation weeks earlier. More about that later.



**Hank O'Day in civilian clothes
as Cubs manager in 1914.**

O'Day is now enshrined with many of the players for whom he called balls and strikes. Honored for his ramrod-straight, no-frills style, O'Day will be inducted into the Hall of Fame next July in Cooperstown, N.Y.

O'Day joined New York Yankees owner Jacob Ruppert and 19th Century catcher-third baseman Deacon White as inductees from the Hall's 16-member Pre-Integration Era Committee announced at baseball's Winter Meetings in Nashville. The trio were elected from a ballot of six former players, three executives and one umpire whose contributions to the game were most significant from baseball origins through 1946. The Chicago Baseball Museum had campaigned for another illustrious Chicagoan – William L. Veeck, president of the Cubs from 1919 to 1933 – for inclusion on that ballot.

Twelve votes were needed for election. O'Day and Ruppert each got 15, while White collected 14. Only other nominee with a Chicago connection was ex-shortstop Marty Marion, who was White Sox manager in 1955-56.

The Pre-Integration Era Committee was comprised of Hall of Fame members Bert Blyleven, Pat Gillick, Phil Niekro and Don Sutton; major league executives Roland Hemond (a former Sox general manager), Bill DeWitt, Gary Hughes (a former top Cubs scout) and Bob Watson; and veteran media members and historians Jim Henneman, Steve Hirdt, Peter Morris, Phil Pepe, Tom Simon, Claire Smith, T.R. Sullivan and Mark Whicker. Hall of Fame Chairman of the Board Jane Forbes Clark served as the non-voting chairman of the Pre-Integration Era Committee.

The Pre-Integration Era ballot was devised by the Baseball Writers' Association of America-appointed Historical Overview Committee, comprised of 11 veteran members, which screened all eligible players, managers, umpires and executives to develop the final 10-name ballot: Dave Van Dyck (*Chicago Tribune*), Bob Elliott (*Toronto Sun*), Rick Hummel (*St. Louis Post-Dispatch*), Steve Hirdt (*Elias Sports Bureau*), Bill Madden (*New York Daily News*), Ken Nigro (formerly *Baltimore Sun*), Jack O'Connell (BBWAA secretary/treasurer), Tracy Ringolsby (*FSN Rocky Mountain*), Glenn Schwarz (formerly *San Francisco Chronicle*), Claire Smith (ESPN) and Mark Whicker (*Orange County Register*).

O'Day became the 10th umpire to be inducted into the Hall of Fame. He worked 10 World Series, including the inaugural event in 1903.

Players became ump, writers promoted to team presidents

As part of a bygone era when baseball figures did not have to concentrate on their specialty from Day One, O'Day was the only man to ever play, manage and umpire in the National League. Cross-migration into different parts of baseball was more common. Some former players gravitated to umpiring after their careers, instead of neophyte umpires concentrating on their craft in amateur leagues before breaking into the low minors on an ascent to The Show. Also included were sportswriters becoming general manager types, such as William L. Veeck moving directly from covering the Cubs for the old *Chicago American* to running the team as president appointed by admiring owner William Wrigley Jr.

One of the latest examples was 1945 Cub Frank Secory, whose pinch single was instrumental in the winning 12th-inning rally in Game 6 – the last-ever Fall Classic Cubs victory. Outfielder Secory then became a NL umpire from 1952 to 1970, setting a league record by umping in nine official no-hitters.

O'Day pitched professionally from 1884 to 1890, including four seasons in the National League. His best NL season was 9-1 with the 1889 New York Giants, earning a salary of \$2,000. Interestingly, his most famous call on the baselines nearly two decades later would upset Giants history amid the reign of powerful manager John McGraw.

Moving back and forth from a big-league umpiring stint that began in 1895, O'Day managed the Reds and Cubs to fourth-place finishes – 75-78 with the Reds in 1912 and 78-76 with the Cubs in 1914.

'Merkle's Boner' all-time call

All these accomplishments, though, seemingly became secondary to his call of “Merkle’s Boner” in the middle of the heated pennant race between the Cubs and Giants on Sept. 23, 1908 at New York’s Polo Grounds.

As recalled in the new E-book *Alou Makes the Catch: An Alternate History of the Chicago Cubs*, the actual timeline featured Giants shortstop Al Bridwell driving in the winning run (in the form of Moose McCormick, who had been on third) with a single to center in the bottom of the ninth for an apparent 2–1 Giants victory. Giants rookie Fred Merkle, just 19, was on first base at the time. He started for second, then peeled off for his dugout instead when he saw thousands of fans swarming the field in celebration. Not touching second on a game-ending hit was customary in those days, and umpiring crews rarely called it at the time. However, Official Rule 4.09(a) stated: “A run is not scored if the runner advances to home base during a play in which the third out is made . . . by any runner being forced out.”



Fred Merkle

Second baseman Johnny Evers, noticing Merkle’s U-turn, called for the baseball, which he somehow obtained amid the maelstrom of fans. Evers touched second base. O'Day called Merkle out on the force play, nullifying the winning run. The game—perhaps the most controversial in major league history—thus ended in a tie, depriving the Giants of the victory that could have given them a one-game margin to edge out the Cubs for the National League pennant and a World Series berth.

Instead, the Cubs and Giants ended up tied at season’s end with 98–55 records. The National League Board of Directors backed up the original ruling that Merkle had neglected to touch second base and was therefore out based on league rules. The Cubs won the tie-breaking game 4–2, earning their third consecutive National League pennant and leaving the Giants feeling robbed.

In a rare long-form explanation of his actions, O'Day wrote to NL president Harry Pulliam. The punctuation and abbreviations are original:

“In the game to-day at New York between New York and the Chicago Club. In the last half of the 9th inning, the score was a tie 1–1. New York was at the Bat, with two Men out, McCormick of N. York on 3rd Base and Merkle of N. York on 1st Base; Bridwell was at the Bat and hit a clean single Base-Hit to Center Field. Merkle did not run the Ball out; he started toward 2nd Base, but on getting half way there he turned and ran down the field toward the Club House. The Ball was fielded in to 2nd Base for a Chgo. Man to make the play, when McGinnity ran from the Coacher's Box out in the Field to 2nd Base and interfered with the Play being made. Emslie, who said he did not watch Merkle, asked me if Merkle touched 2nd Base. I said he did not. Then Emslie called Merkle out, and I would not allow McCormick's Run to score. The Game at the end of the 9th inning was 1–1. The People ran out on the Field. I did not ask to have the Field cleared, as it was too dark to continue play.”

O'Day had different ruling on same force play

As part of the Merkle chapter in *Alou Makes The Catch*, St. Louis baseball historian James J. “Harry” Rygelski provided a bit more backstory, involving O'Day, to Evers' quick-thinking action:

“Johnny Evers play at retrieving the ball—accounts differ as to whether it was the original one hit into the outfield or a new one from the ump—was one of the smartest ever by a Cub, and has been downplayed by New York-leaning writers over the decades, who view it more as a New York tragedy than the tremendous moment in Cubs history, as it should be noted. Merkle was merely following the custom of the time. When it looked as if the winning run had scored, runners elsewhere headed for the dugout or, in this case, the players' dressing room beyond the center field fence.

“Three weeks earlier, in a Sep. 4 game between the Pirates and Cubs in Pittsburgh, Evers pulled off the same kind of play, but the ump didn't allow it. The Pirates had the winning run on third and a man on first when the batter lined a single to the outfield. The runner on first base ran toward second, then turned back for the dugout after seeing the lead runner touch home. The base umpire [there were only two umpers per game then] was O'Day, who would also be the ump calling the bases in the Sept. 23 Cubs-Giants game. He disallowed Evers' tag of second base on Sept. 4 after a vehement protest by Evers and other Cubs, but did call the runner out at second on Sept. 23. One can only wonder if the opposition O'Day got on Sept. 4 influenced his decision on Sept. 23.”

O'Day's reasoning for the different calls of the same play will never be known. He usually kept his own counsel. O'Day was known for his work on the field, including razor-sharp skill calling borderline balls and strikes. Above all, his integrity and ethics was legendary. He was no showman in the manner of a slew of present-day umpires, who often seem to revel in publicity amid arguments with players and managers.

Amid his World Series assignments, he was up-close-and-personal for another historic play. In 1920, O'Day was the second base umpire when Bill Wambsganss pulled off the

only unassisted triple play in Fall Classic history.

An ironman umpire

O'Day's 3,986 total games as an umpire ranked third in major league history when he retired.



Hank O'Day and umpire confidant Bob Emslie with Cubs players at the old West Side Grounds stadium.

Off the field, O'Day lived a solitary life with little clue to his motivations. Sitting in a hotel lobby one day, a fan came up and complimented O'Day on his calls in the game a few hours earlier. O'Day's only response was a complaint about a lack of privacy at the hotel.

Fellow umpire Bob Emslie (who worked the Merkle game with him, as O'Day referred in the letter to Pulliam) was one of his few confidants. When O'Day went to Emslie's home in Ontario, his most common stance was sitting quietly on the front porch, not saying a word.

But all reports on his life suggest O'Day mellowed as illnesses engulfed him after his retirement from umpiring in 1927. Baseball never forgot him. The game's big names were well-represented at his funeral in 1935, in a city he never stopped embracing in his own quiet way.