



Cubs' Donahue far ahead of her time as baseball's first female executive

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(First of a two-part series)

Women still operate under a glass ceiling in baseball.

It's still a boys club, be it the executive suite, the broadcast booth and certainly the clubhouse. There are no majority female owners, only one play-by-play broadcaster and some scattered baseball operations executives. Women have made tangible inroads on the business and marketing side in the game and among baseball journalists, with Susan Slusser of the San Francisco Chronicle serving as the first female president of the Baseball Writers Association of America.



From left: Barbara Ernesti, Mary Beth Manning and Marge Manning gather to recall the storied life of their "Aunt Midge."

If the barriers are only gently buckling now, imagine what Margaret Donahue faced in the 1920s.

Donahue's story, like that of then-Cubs president William L. Veeck, the man who hired her and groomed her with responsibilities, is one of the more under-told and underrated of team history. The native of far northwest suburban Huntley, Ill., was a true pioneer, as a female executive given daily management duties by Veeck only a few years after women were granted the national right to vote, in 1920.

Veeck, father of "Baseball Barnum" Bill Veeck, hired Donahue as a stenographer soon after he became team president in 1919. She had only two years' education, including secretarial school, after grade school. Yet after seven years working for Veeck, he announced a startling promotion at a New York meeting, as recalled by author Paul Dickson in his recent book, *Bill Veeck: Baseball's Greatest Maverick*.

“I haven’t signed any players recently,” Veeck said, “but I’ll tell you what I have done that means much to our club. I have, or rather our board of directors has elected a new club secretary, a woman, the only woman secretary in organized ball. Her name is Miss Margaret Donahue...We feel that in Miss Donahue we have added a real asset to our club organization.”

Dickson then wrote: “As though he thought the title might be underappreciated, he pointed out that the secretary was one of five jobs at the club that required annual reelection by the board of directors. Donahue—who had been the team’s bookkeeper and had handled season tickets, press passes, cash receipts, and transfers for the Cubs and all other Wrigley Field events—was the first female baseball executive who rose from the ranks.”

Before the 1929 season, Donahue instituted the practice of season tickets for the increasingly popular Cubs, which had just added Rogers Hornsby to an already-powerful lineup. Veeck, who had instituted “Ladies Day” to huge success a few years previously, reported the sale of “pasteboards” constituted the biggest pre-season sales rush in Cubs history.

Donahue also became an expert in baseball rules, including waivers, serving as a de facto assistant general manager to Veeck and his successors. Her sharp mind was so admired that during Veeck’s funeral in Oct. 1933, one Chicago sports editor suggested Donahue would be an appropriate successor to Veeck.



A newspaper clipping covering William L. Veeck's 1933 funeral. At the time, a Chicago sports editor suggested Margaret Donahue would be a worthy successor to Veeck.

By the time Donahue retired in 1958, she was vice president and executive secretary of the Cubs. Her reputation at Wrigley Field had long been well-established and respected.

“I was trained by Mr. Veeck to do my best to make customers leave the ballpark happy, no matter what happens,” Donahue said in a 1955 International News Service interview.

Donahue, better known as “Midge” to her extended family and friends, lived 20 years after her retirement, eventually moving back with her brother and two sisters to a quiet life in Huntley. Her accomplishments have faded a bit in history as one tumultuous event after another, from 1969 forward, has engulfed the Cubs’ timeline.

But she made her mark. Donahue never married, but she was like an associate mother to three nieces in Huntley who are present and accounted-for to tell her story.



The family collection is filled with vintage photos of Margaret Donahue.

Nieces recall a dynamic woman and executive

On a recent Thursday, sisters Marge Manning, Mary Beth Manning and Barbara Ernesti sat down at Marge’s dining room table. Surrounded by memorabilia of Aunt Midge, they recalled a woman – way ahead of her time – who combined an impressive business mind with a delicate human touch for both her family and Wrigley Field fans.

“She was a very gentle person, very friendly with all of us,” Marge Manning said. “But still a very strong person, quite an organizer. She had things pretty much under control at home and at work. She could get right in at the crux of the matter.”

Said Mary Beth Manning: “I think grew into the job. She was hired in 1919 and was named secretary by 1926. So must’ve shown her ability in that short of a period that pushed her into that big job that had never been filled by a woman before.”

“They all came about gradually, her responsibilities, and she handled them well,” said Ernesti. “She was not pushy at all. People – the men – didn’t feel intimidated by her. She handled details apparently very well. She had the ability to accept more and more responsibility. She was the authority on waivers and trades, and did all the paperwork.”

Pointing to a vintage photo, Mary Beth sketched out Donahue’s personality: “She’s very young, but you can see the intensity at her desk, in her eyes.”

From their 21st Century vantage point, the sisters could see how Aunt Midge broke barriers, certainly helped by the forward-thinking Veeck.

Creator of the season-ticket plan

“She had this great organizational ability to see what was wrong,” said Marge Manning. Donahue came up with the season-ticket idea for simple economic reasons. “She was upset because they’d save tickets, people didn’t show up and that was a waste,” said Marge.

Later, she created the forerunner of TicketMaster, TicketTron and all the electronic ticket-selling services. Donahue arranged for Cubs tickets to be sold at the Western Union office.

Aunt Midge was a gracious host to the Huntley girls – whether at Wrigley Field, her home in Evanston (after previously living in Chicago’s Rogers Park neighborhood), at other events in Chicago or even at the World Series in Milwaukee.

“As time went on, and we grew older, we used to go into there to visit, and they’d take us downtown on Saturday,” Marge said. “She got us tickets to plays, the ice follies because being involved with the Cubs, she’d have access to tickets. At the ice follies, we had front-row seats. She was sitting right there. One of these clowns jumped right into her lap.”

“Frick and Frack,” said Mary Beth Manning.

“She had a horrified look on her face,” said Marge. “She had on a new fur coat. The clown was all sweaty. She laughed about it and said that’s what you get for getting a free ticket. They know you’re right there in front.”



Margaret Donahue and William Veeck look over a torrent of ticket orders for the 1929 World Series at Wrigley Field.

A trip to Philip K. Wrigley’s office in the Wrigley Building also was a side benefit of hanging with Aunt Midge.

“I remember she used to have an office down in the Wrigley Building,” Ernesti said. “We went down on a Saturday, and he (Wrigley) wasn’t there. She said let’s go in (to Wrigley’s office) and look out over the lake. Wrigley’s secretary was there.”

Even more fringe benefits were available to young Donahue kinfolk.

Kids rubbed shoulders with baseball names

“When I’d go and stay with them in Evanston, I’d go down (to Wrigley Field) later,” Marge Manning said. “She’d leave a ticket for me. One day there was a great, big guy sitting in the box with me, and he said you’re going to be television because this is a busman’s holiday for me. He was Tom Gorman, the umpire. He taught me the official way to keep score.”

And that helped when sitting among the baseball elite at County Stadium.

“Midge took me up to Milwaukee for two games of the (1957) World Series,” said Marge. “One (seatmate) was the Pirates manager, who said, ‘Can I borrow your scorecard...You keep a mean scorecard.’”

Another time, Manning was invited to sit with the scoreboard operator, who pressed switches for balls, strikes and outs across the field in the pressbox.

“Midge said you can go, but don’t stay around during the game,” she said. “I went up there at 12 o’clock, I punched in some numbers and he let me play around with the scoreboard for a few minutes. It got closer to the game and I said thank you, I was getting ready to go. He said, ‘Stay here, you’re not going to bother anybody.’ He said, ‘We’ll call her.’ She said no. When she got home at night, she said, ‘You could have stayed. But when you called me, I had to say no.’”

Donahue probably had more varied duties than any other Cubs employee. In addition to signing checks – Ernie Banks’ payout bore one of her later signatures – and contracts while confirming waivers, she distributed the baseballs to the umpires before each game. The balls were stored in a cabinet in her office. Running the ballpark office staff, she also supervised first aid and gave comfort to lost children.

“It’s a rare day when I get to watch a complete game even though the team is playing but a few steps from my door,” Donahue said in the 1955 interview. She worked in a wood-paneled office under the grandstand.

“When I stayed with her on weekends and went to games, there was someone who was hit with a broken bat,” Marge said. “She spent a lot of time dealing with those incidents at the park, making sure they got to first aid. We’d hear some of those things at night from her.”

The lost-and-found lady

Donahue kept candy, gum and baseball stickers to sooth the nerves of children who temporarily got separated from their family at games. She also had cleaning fluid on hand for the kids after they spilled concessions on their clothes.

Donahue literally rode shotgun on Sundays for the Bears’ gate receipts in the decades the NFL team played at Wrigley Field. After George Halas paid the players, the officials and other team workers, Donahue and two Chicago police officers took the remaining cash in a cab to store overnight in a safe in the Palmer House until the bank opened Monday morning.

In the end, the people-person Donahue is the one best remembered.

“I remember Walter, the janitor, at Wrigley Field, (talking with her) as she walked in,” said Ernesti. “She always talked to Bobby Dorr, the groundskeeper (who lived in a bungalow on the northwest corner of Wrigley Field). They were close and talked to each other. Even after she retired, she’d still stay hello to Bobby Dorr when she went to the ballpark.”

Margaret “Midge” Donahue made a fabulous impression. Her nieces have letters and commendations from all corners of baseball to that effect. They and others take the measure of an all-time baseball personality in Part Two.

See the video of the interview with Marge Manning, Mary Beth Manning and Barbara Ernesti at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5CTN1hzZYnQ>.