



Margaret Donahue's nieces have treasure trove of memorabilia from her life

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(Second of a two-part series)

You could look far and wide throughout baseball and not successfully find a nay-sayer about Margaret Donahue.

The proof is in the sheer number of letters and tributes she and her family received, now priceless memorabilia in the possession of her three nieces, Marge and Mary Beth Manning and Barbara Ernesti, in Huntley, Ill., where Donahue grew up and where she retired after her nearly 40 years working for the Cubs.

Even the one gentleman whom her nieces suggest caused her some frustration in the 1940s and 1950s – former Cubs general manager James T. Gallagher – wrote a lyrical letter of tribute near the end of her life.

Donahue, who became the off-the-field heart-and-soul of the Cubs, was a woman way ahead of her time, rising to vice president and executive secretary of the North Siders. But even before she gained her titles to match her job responsibilities, the person affectionately known as “Midge” was someone all of baseball respected.

“She had a kindly, beautiful face,” said Ernesti.

Yet Donahue combined a compassionate personality with stick-to-iveness in the baseball business world. She was an expert on the game’s rules, especially waivers. So no wonder American League president Will Harridge wrote her a letter on the eve of the



Marge Manning shows off Midge Donahue's lifetime "gold pass" from Major League Baseball and another pass in honor of her service.

1938 World Series between the Cubs and Yankees, joshingly suggesting now we're friendly enemies.

There are multiple tributes from Donahue's longest-running boss, Cubs owner Philip K. Wrigley. Included is a scroll issued upon her retirement early in 1958, praising her as a "a nationally acknowledged authority on the intricacies of baseball rules and regulations."

A letter from Bill Veeck

Standing out is a letter dated May 13, 1980, two years after her death, by Bill Veeck, with whom Donahue worked from 1933 to 1940. Veeck's appreciation to Donahue's sister, Mabel Hemmer, shows the goodwill the future Baseball Barnum had with a woman his father, William L. Veeck, had first hired in 1919 as his stenographer and groomed as his right-hand person. The Cubs front office of his youth was obviously a fond time.

"My sincere appreciation for sending along the photograph of my daddy, which you found among Margaret's effects," Veeck wrote to Hemmer. "It truly was a delight to receive the picture, which I might add arrived in excellent condition. It will be kept among my treasured possessions. Many thanks for your thoughtfulness in remembering me."



Barbara Ernesti (left) and Mary Beth Manning with a framed photo of a crowd overflowing onto Wrigley Field's outfield in 1934 from their aunt's memorabilia.

The piles of letters and newspaper clippings, along with photos and other tidbits, were kept in boxes originally by Donahue's parents and one sister. Eventually they found their way to Hemmer, the only Donahue child who married, and in turn to her three daughters.

"None of her (two) sisters or brother married," Marge Manning said of the siblings who lived with Donahue for decades in Chicago and Evanston. "When they saw something about her, they'd cut it out. Her parents and (one) sister saved clips and photos."

The family is now seriously considering better preserving the collection in plastic or other protective covering.

Not needing such a shield is perhaps the most prized possession of all – Donahue's "gold pass," entitling her to lifetime admission to Major League Baseball games.

"We were talking for years we should do something (with the collection) because it (Donahue's career) was quite an accomplishment," Marge Manning said.

"We had a great big carton. The other night, Andrea (her daughter) got digging deeper and deeper, there was all this other stuff underneath."

But what Donahue left behind pales in comparison to the oral history that her nieces can recall. Their remembrances of trips to Wrigley Field, the Wrigley Building, the World Series at County Stadium in Milwaukee, and shopping and other outings in Chicago with Donahue are a treasure to hear.

Margaret and Mary Beth Manning and Barbara Ernesti then got to spend time with Donahue in her senior years when she and her three siblings – two sisters and a brother – returned to be close with family in Huntley. They resided in their mother’s family home on Dean Street.

The farm-oriented town, about 12 miles northwest of Elgin, once had Al Capone’s associates bring his car to a local repair shop to throw off potential saboteurs or assassins. Huntley was still rural when Donahue returned. Used to long work days at Wrigley Field, she did not exactly become inactive.

Mary Beth Manning recalled how Aunt Midge volunteered for various activities. An appreciative family, remembering how good of a hostess she was back in Chicago, would cook for her.

Gallagher’s affection better late than never

As her health declined, some who worked with her tried to re-establish contact. One was ex-GM Gallagher, under whose administration the Cubs declined in the 1940s, save for the one pennant in the wartime season of 1945. Gallagher and Cubs manager Jimmie Wilson were derided as the “James Boys” in bad seasons in 1942 and 1943.

Donahue experienced stress working with Gallagher, according to her nieces. But her former boss was profound in a Jan. 13, 1978 letter to her family, two weeks before she died at 85. Gallagher wrote that he had “neglected to express my affection until it was too late” and added “how much she meant to me...please tell Margaret that I love her.”

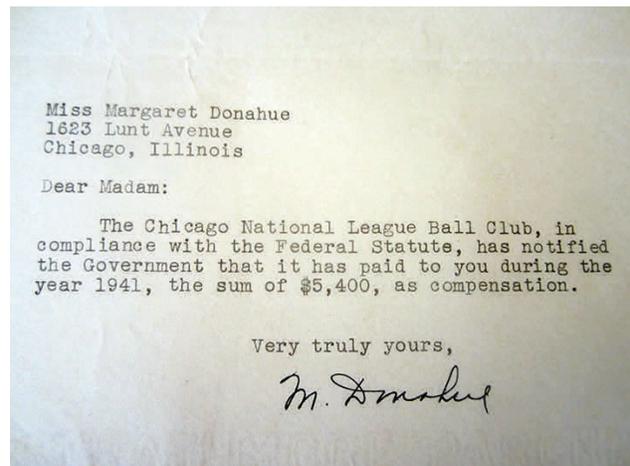
WGN’s Jack Brickhouse eulogized Donahue on the night of her funeral. She had welcomed the 24-year-old Brickhouse to Chicago in 1940 when Bob Elson got him hired at WGN. Sports Illustrated announced her death in its Feb. 13, 1978 issue.

But that isn’t the end of the remembrances of Midge Donahue.

A letter to the Ricketts family

Margaret and Mary Beth Manning, and Barbara Ernesti wrote an April 22 letter to the Ricketts family who own the Cubs:

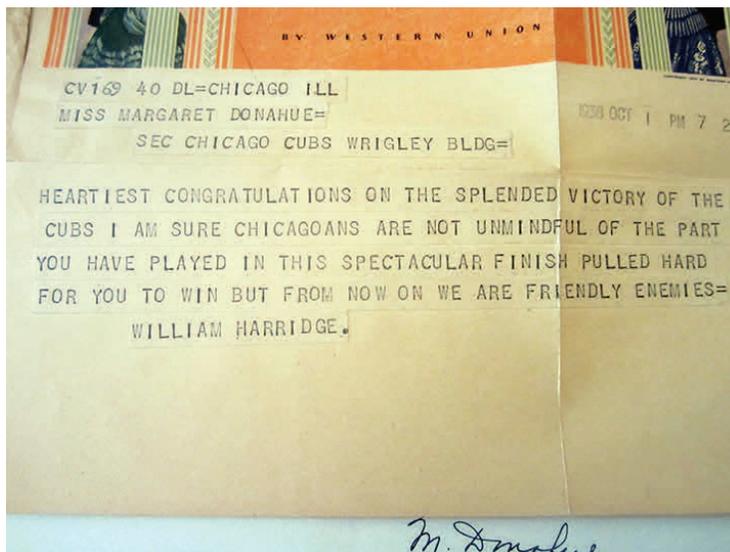
“We appreciate your efforts, as the present owners, to initiate plans both to preserve Wrigley Field as an iconic destination and the Cubs’ ‘home base,’ and to guide the team into the future—one that



Margaret Donahue's official letter of record on her 1941 salary: \$5,400.

we all hope has a World Series appearance in it! In fact, we were relieved to learn only last weekend that you've secured an agreement with Mayor Emanuel and the City of Chicago. We ask now that you consider Margaret Donahue's career with the Cubs, and we hope you will agree that she merits a commemorative tribute at the park where she worked for almost four decades—perhaps a 'Midge Day' as part of a special 'Women in Baseball' type of event.

"It is securely a part of club history that the Cubs were ahead of the times in promoting a woman to such a high-profile position. Notably, however, a book appeared last year that underscores the importance of her career all over again: Paul Dickson's *Bill Veeck: Baseball's Greatest Maverick*. He writes engagingly, to be sure, about Bill Veeck, Jr.'s, storied tenure in professional baseball. However, Mr. Dickson also covers the early history of the Chicago Cubs organization involving Bill's father, William, Sr., and—most exciting to our family—he even provided us with new information about Aunt Midge! The attached page ('Validating Excerpts') includes all of the places in his rollicking baseball book where Mr. Dickson cites her role and contributions.



AL president William Harridge letter to Donahue after the Cubs won the 1938 NL pennant: "I am sure Chicagoans are not unmindful of the part you have played in this spectacular finish. Pulled hard for you to win. But from now on we are friendly enemies."

"Upon her retirement, Philip K. Wrigley issued and signed a proclamation outlining her achievements. In addition, the presidents of the American and National Leagues, William Harridge and Warren Giles, respectively, also recognized her contributions to major league baseball by gifting her with a rarely-issued 'lifetime golden pass.' Using the

pass, she could attend a game at any Major League Baseball ballpark (a photocopy of the golden pass is in the three-ring binders). Her grandnieces and grandnephews have fond memories of attending Cubs games with Aunt Midge and getting to see her present the golden pass. We only regret that it was not transferable to any of her relatives!

"Aunt Midge never married (in fact, when a reporter raised the subject with her once, she replied to the effect that suitors did not have patience for her long hours!). She lived for many years in Evanston, Illinois, with two of her sisters, Bernice and Mary 'Donnie' Donahue, and William, her only brother who survived into adulthood. Eventually, they all returned to Huntley, Illinois, to live with our mother in the family home, and that is where Midge remained until she died in 1978.

"Our aunt's accomplishments as part of the Chicago Cubs organization have been a source of pride to us and our extended families for all of these years. Her role with the

team is the largest contributing factor to the fact that we all bleed ‘Cubby blue’ to this day.

“However, it is the publication of Mr. Dickson’s book that has prompted us to contact all of you, as we have been so encouraged to discover that even this sports writer—who never contacted or interviewed any of us—was able to discern Midge’s worth to the team and the game of baseball through his own independent research.

“As you embark on a new era at Wrigley Field, we would welcome the opportunity to discuss potential ways to commemorate and honor Margaret Donahue’s meritorious service to the Cubs organization. It has been our dream all these years to see the development of a meaningful recognition of Aunt Midge’s career. We can assure that we would love nothing better—except seeing the Cubs in a World Series, of course!

“P.S. According to Paul Dickson, Bill Veeck himself once said of Aunt Midge: “She has forgotten more baseball in her forty years with the Cubs than most of the so-called magnates will ever know.”

Margaret and Mary Beth Manning and Barbara Ernesti could not have summed it up better. If the Cubs better honor their history as part of the planned Wrigley Field renovation, Margaret Donahue ought to be at the center of that time-trip backward.

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



The Cubs were so popular in 1929-30 that even their executives appeared in ads. Here, Margaret Donahue and William L. Veeck help promote oatmeal for Quaker Oats in a 1930 Saturday Evening Post ad.