

New Veeck Biography Is Comprehensive, Overdue

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From planting the ivy on the outfield bricks at Wrigley Field in 1937 to his final contribution of saving the White Sox from relocation to Seattle in 1975, William Louis Veeck Jr. cast a long, indelible shadow on Chicago baseball.

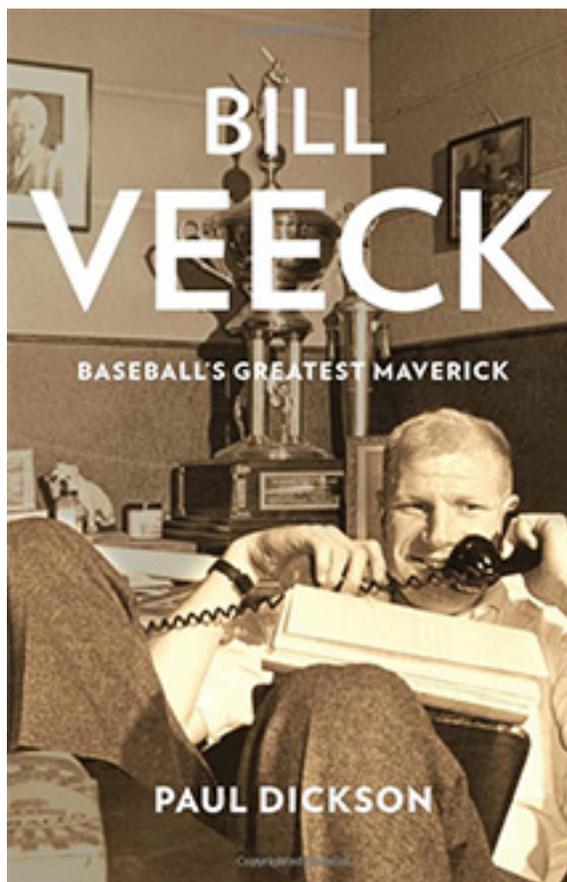
At last, someone has written a comprehensive biography about the man best known for putting a midget up to bat in 1951 and staging the death of disco with baseball's most successful (and disastrous) promotion in 1979 at old Comiskey Park.

Now comes *Bill Veeck: Baseball's Greatest Maverick* (Walker and Co., \$28) by noted baseball historian Paul Dickson, the first definitive biography of the master showman. While many authors had tried to write the story of Veeck before, they had to compete with his own classic autobiography *Veeck As in Wreck*, which was written with Ed Linn, published in 1962 and updated in 1986 after his death.

While *Veeck As in Wreck* is considered the greatest of all baseball memoirs, missing pieces needed to be told to bring to life one of the most significant figures of the 20th century, one who was far more than a baseball team owner.

Dickson does an brilliant job of retelling Veeck's story, warts and all. He paints a picture of an extremely complex man, who despite being born into privilege and owning the Milwaukee Brewers minor league baseball team ended up enlisting in the Marines in 1943 as a private and being sent to the Pacific. He suffered a war injury in World War II that led to his right leg eventually being amputated and the subsequent famous wooden leg that he used as an ashtray to support his heavy smoking habit.

A Renaissance Man emerges from Dickson's broad brush. Veeck was a visionary who supported man liberal causes, a voracious reader who could hold court on a number of subjects with authority. His various television and radio shows were



not just sports shows.

Dickson told the Chicago Baseball Museum that he was able to get full cooperation from the Veeck family, including nephew Fred Krehbiel, who worked under Bill Jr. as an office boy for the 1959 White Sox pennant-winners, Mary Frances Veeck, his second wife, and son Mike, the co-architect of Disco Demolition. Many authors had approached the family before, but they did not feel comfortable with the project at the time.

The latest result breaks new ground with significant details that either weren't known or long forgotten. For instance, after older brother Maurice accidentally shot and killed himself in 1907, the Veeck family was affected in no small way. His mother swore off children, and it took years to convince her otherwise. Bill Jr. was born in Chicago seven years later.

There are additional insights on the role that Veeck's father played in the Black Sox scandal as well as his own stint in the military, failed attempt to purchase the Philadelphia Phillies in 1943 and blueprint for major league expansion in the mid-1950s. All the while, it is obvious that he had changed baseball in Chicago and the nation forever, the fans first and foremost in his mind.

"The fans don't owe me a thing, of course, I owe them. . . Baseball is really offering an escape from the problems in daily life. We are selling an illusion . . . that if people come to the park and plunk their money down, they will enjoy themselves for a few hours and we hope carry a happy memory away with them," wrote Veeck in the seminal March 15, 1976 Sports Illustrated article Baseball Couldn't Shut Him Out, which detailed his second stint as White Sox owner over the objections of many of his peers.

While most baseball fans know about Bill Jr., who virtually grew up at Wrigley Field, many don't know much about his father, the Cubs president from 1918 until his death in 1933. Bill Sr. was responsible for three Cubs pennants (1918, 1929 and 1932) as well as several significant changes to the ballpark.

Dickson devotes the first two chapters (Senior, Veeck on Deck) outlining how important Bill Sr. was to his son's career. Often quoted that he was "the only human being ever raised in a ballpark," Bill Jr. began his baseball career as a vendor at Wrigley Field at age 13 and later was part of the grounds crew there. "I did everything but play shortstop," he was once quoted about his formative years.

In 1937, Veeck planted the Ivy at Wrigley Field along with Chinese elms that have long since died. He also played a major role in the construction of the manually-operated scoreboard and outfield bleachers. Four years later, he left Chicago and purchased the American Association Milwaukee Brewers in partnership with former Cubs star and manager Charlie Grimm. He owned the Brewers for five years.

In 1943, Veeck tried to buy the Phillies and stock the team with Negro League players, but Commissioner Kenesaw Mountain Landis nixed the deal. Dickson devotes an entire chapter that shows Veeck to be far more of a visionary than Branch Rickey, who signed Jackie Robinson in 1946 after Veeck had first tried to break major league baseball's color line.

It was not surprising that it was Veeck who broke the American League color line in Chicago. On July 5, 1947, while he owned the Indians, Veeck signed Larry Doby, the American League's first black player. For years, Veeck's team featured the most blacks in the league, including future White Sox star Minnie Minoso, who was purchased from the New York Cubans of the Negro Leagues to the dismay of the old guard.

In 1960, Veeck built at a cost of \$300,000 the first exploding scoreboard, which was the forerunner to present ones. It entertained fans and the surrounding neighborhood with a spectacular fireworks display whenever a White Sox player clubbed a home run. The same team was the first to have its players' names on the back of their uniforms.

During Veeck's second term, the business of baseball dramatically changed with the start of free agency and escalating salaries. He operated the team on a shoestring budget and did not have the financial strength to sign and keep many players who went on to play key roles with other teams.

At first, Veeck turned the changing baseball economic situation to his temporary advantage. He developed the rent-a-player strategy -- trading players he would not be able to retain such as future Hall of Famer pitcher Rich Gossage for those he could use before they signed lucrative free agent contracts with other clubs.

Veeck nearly succeeded with his strategy in 1977 with the South Side Hit Men, a team that featured home-run hitters Oscar Gamble and Richie Zisk and were in first place for much of the season. The Sox fell from first place late in the season due to a lack of pitching and defense.

In that same magical season, Veeck got then team broadcaster Harry Caray started on his tradition of singing Take Me Out the Ball Game, which he carried across town to Wrigley Field in 1981. In 1979, he watched his son Mike put together Disco Demolition Night, which was probably the most successful baseball promotion ever. It attracted nearly 100,000 fans, but only half could get into the ball park.

By 1980, Veeck realized he did not have the cash to operate a winning baseball team in light of the tremendous impact of free agency. He sold the White Sox to the current ownership group chaired by Jerry Reinsdorf after the 1980 season.

Veeck spent his final days where he started his baseball career -- paying for a bleacher seat at Wrigley Field, sitting in the sun with his shirt off, hoping to leave with a happy memory, many of which remain with us decades later.