



## ***Close-knit family keeps Deacon White legend alive through the generations***

*By George Castle, CBM Historian  
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Deacon White was born in 1847, played for the original Chicago National League team – the White Stockings – in 1876 and died in 1939.

By baseball standards, that's antediluvian times for recognizing one of baseball's pioneering catchers, inducted into the Hall of Fame in July. There's only a few handfuls of living witnesses who even knew White, who could testify to his greatness.

Fortunately, his family multiplied down through the generations, while carrying down the stories of White in the most traditional style. That's the consistency of White's descendants – Watkins is the married name of White's only child, Grace, who had four children with husband Roger.

They have a sense of baseball history with their distinguished forebear. They love the publishing business, working in its various forms for three consecutive generations. And all family members from White to the present have a strong Christian faith. James Laurie White got the nickname "Deacon" from his roughneck baseball teammates because he always had his Bible close at hand.

So it was with great honor that Jerry Watkins, 66, of west suburban Wheaton, Ill., wrote and delivered the Hall of Fame acceptance speech for his great-grandfather in Cooperstown. He was recruited by his aunt, Betty Watkins Jackson, White's only living grand-



**Jerry Watkins with photos of his famous great-grandfather at his Wheaton, Ill. home.**

child, for the uplifting task. But persuasion wasn't needed at all since Watkins has been re-living White's life and career through family stories since he was little.

"It's been a huge thing in our family since I can remember," Watkins said the other day in his sunny, airy den. "As a small boy, I remember my dad (Daniel Watkins) taking me into his office to tell me about his grandfather. He was very proud of his grandfather and he told me many stories about his grandfather."

Daniel Watkins transported his son to a radically different baseball world of the 1870s – of pitchers delivering the ball under-handed, softball style, and of White and all other fielders regularly sustaining broken fingers working without gloves.

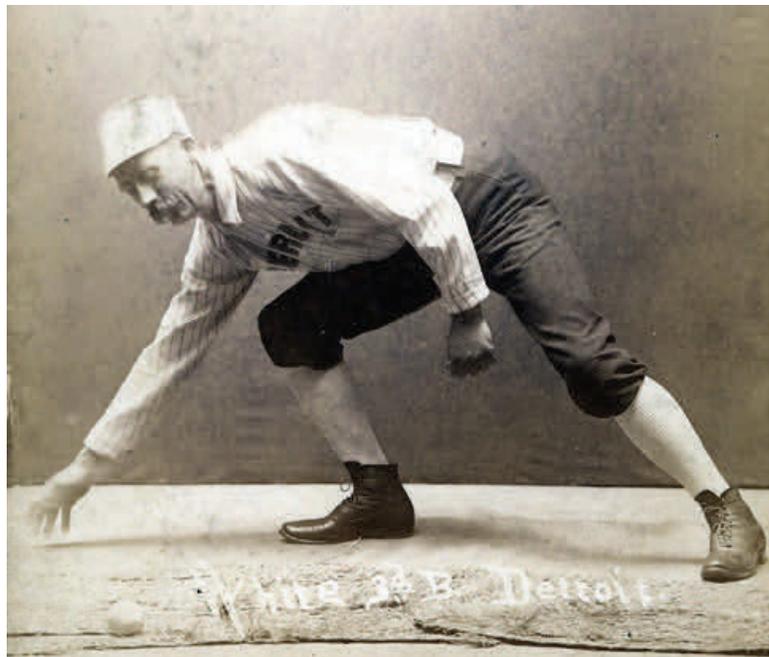
### **White snared foul tips and certain injuries**

"The one I remembered the most as a kid," Watkins said, "is how catchers stood behind the plate, let the ball bounce, and they were 15 to 20 feet behind the batter. He was known for creeping up behind the batter as the ball was being delivered. They didn't stand right behind the batter because of foul tips from the batter. He would creep up and take the ball on the fly (via the foul tips).

"They had a rule that no matter how many strikes you had, if the catcher caught a foul tip, the batter would be out. Now it's (only for) a third strike. He was known as 'the cat.' He would take a lot of foul tips. He took a lot of foul tips into his body.

"When my father (who was 14 when White died) took his grandfather's hand, it was like taking a tree branch. Every finger in his hand was broken multiple times."

Displaying such courage in the wake of inevitable injury was a passage into manhood in the post-Civil War era.



**Deacon White in a typical pose about to snare a baseball. White invited hand injuries by snaring foul tips in attempts to retire hitters.**

"The catcher was the manifestation of the folk hero in the book 'Catcher' (by Peter Morris)," said Watkins. "My great-grandfather was too young to fight in the Civil War. By the time the Civil War had ended, this generation afterward, they're seeking a way to (display courage the war veterans had shown).

“Morris makes the argument the catcher manifested that. The catcher was the most important man on the team. The pitcher was just lobbing it up like horseshoes, and then it’s a dead ball. A good catcher could determine the destination of each team. From 1873 to 1877, White played on three different teams, but he won five consecutive championships. That was the peak of his career. He played with seven different teams (from 1871 to 1890).”

A lifetime .312 hitter, White was multi-dimensional as a person.

“He was a deep thinker and a very intellectual man, a very religious man,” said Watkins. As a result, he was the antithesis of the typical crude, vagabond player of the time.

“That’s what players were known as,” he said. “In my speech, I told the story how he proposed marriage to his hometown sweetheart. Her father wouldn’t allow her to marry a ballplayer.

“He was an outstanding person. He had an outstanding Christian witness. He was a strong believer. He let his actions show that.”

### **Family tragedy marred White’s later years**



**Jerry Watkins is flanked at Deacon White's Mendota, Ill. gravesite by sons Ryan (left) and Todd Watkins.**

Eventually, the union of White and wife Marium produced daughter Grace. But that ended up with the big tragedy in his life, after White had settled into his daughter’s home in the west-central Illinois farming community of Mendota, where he is buried. Deacon and Marium White had worked at Mendota College as grounds custodian and house mother, respectively.

“He apparently had a thing for that hometown girl (Alice),” Watkins said of the family history that is the tough undercurrent of the White post-baseball timeline. “Within two weeks after Marium died, he went to New York and proposed (to his original flame). They married, and he brought her back to the house. They lived there, but not too long.

“My grandmother Grace had a very strong relationship with her mother. This did not fly. This woman up and left after a relatively short time. My aunt said this broke his heart. He’d sit on the front porch, waiting for her to come back, and she never did.

“The image stuck in my mind.”

Betty Watkins Jackson also recalled how an elderly White, living in an upstairs bedroom in a home without central heating, would pound on his furnace with a cup when he wanted something.

Roger and Grace Watkins moved from Mendota to Aurora (and White with them) in 1910, shifting their printing business to a bigger city – just as Mendota College, where the couple had met, re-located to Aurora. The school became Aurora College, now Aurora University. The printing company still exists at the Strathmore Co. in the Fox Valley.

### **Printer’s ink in family blood**

Daniel Watkins eventually got out of the printing business and moved his family to California, where he acquired an orange and avocado grove. He also started a newspaper on the side.

“I grew up in that stuff,” Watkins said. After graduating college in 1969, he worked for Prentice-Hall Publishing in 1970 before starting his own Christian children’s-book business, Educational Publishing, in 1980. At one point, Watkins employed a staff of 20 in nearby Carol Stream. Now he runs the business out of his home.

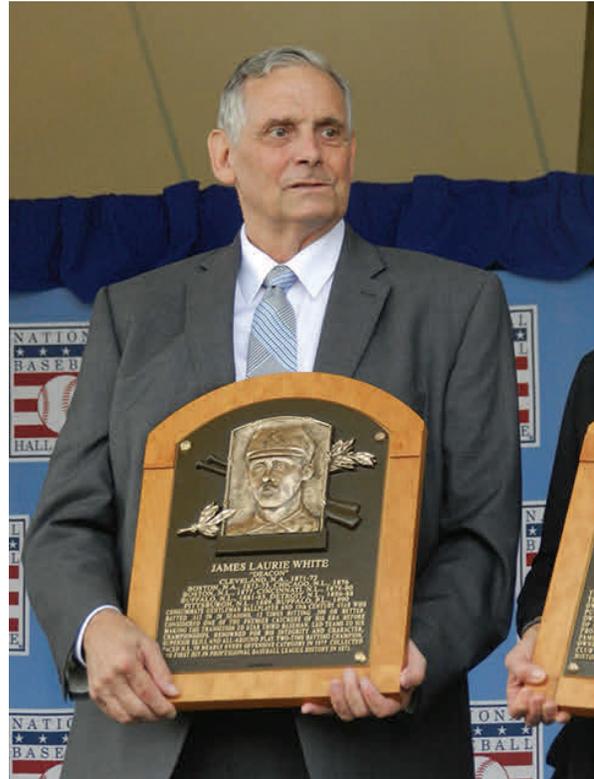
Son Todd Watkins carries on the printer’s ink into another generation as director of design for Tyndale House Publishers in Carol Stream. Another son, Ryan, is a firefighter. Daughter Amanda’s husband is a pastor. Watkins has nine grandchildren in all. The oldest is enrolling at Moody Bible Institute in Chicago in the fall.

Even though the Watkins family is scattered about the country, nearly 50 converged onto Cooperstown for White’s induction. “One of my (first) cousin’s kids came from Australia,” Watkins said.

He put his experience behind the keyboard to good use to honor White.

“My aunt called me up,” Watkins said. “She wanted me to give the speech. I was greatly honored and greatly appreciative. I talked with my wife about it, kicked some ideas around. Christy is very creative. One Saturday afternoon, she was gone for the afternoon, I went to my computer downstairs and wrote it in two hours.”

Watkins sent the speech to the Hall of Fame. He gave copies to Christy and several friends for feedback.



**Jerry Watkins with Deacon White's induction plaque in Cooperstown.**

## Poem had to be cut for length

“I didn’t look at it again until two weeks before the ceremony,” Watkins “I sent it to my mother (Anita) to correct several factual mistakes. (Hall official) Brad Horn gave feedback a couple of days before. I said it was 10-11 minutes. He said I needed to cut it (due to the demands of TV). I had ended the speech with a cool poem, written by a guy named Lancaster in 1936: ‘When Jim White Played.’ It was a 2½—minute poem, so I cut it.”

Before he took the podium, Horn asked if Watkins was nervous speaking in front of the live audience and the TV viewers, with most living Hall of Famers looking on.

“I wasn’t worried about it,” he said.

One distinctive part of the speech was Watkins professing his love of the Cubs by using their Hall of Fame member uniform numbers for his PIN numbers and other forms of personal identification. The numbers he has used are 14 (Ernie Banks), 26 (Billy Williams), 10 (Ron Santo), 23 (Ryne Sandberg) and 31 (Fergie Jenkins). Left out was No. 8 for Andre Dawson, a 2010 enshrinee. The cameras panned to Dawson’s reaction when No. 8 was omitted from the speech.

No insult intended, Watkins said. He had a personal requirement for the use of the numbers.

“Andre Dawson was the nicest man I met there,” he said. “I spent quite a bit of time (a half hour) talking to Andre Dawson. I didn’t tell him I was going to do that. I felt bad I was going to leave it out.

“Truth of the matter is, Andre Dawson went into the Hall of Fame as a Montreal Expo (against Dawson’s preference). I limited it to the ones who have the flags on the (Wrigley Field) foul poles. I loved him as a player. He’s beyond reproach. I only have ID’s or PINS from Cubs Hall of Famers. I just limited it to guys who went in as Cubs.”

Dawson is too classy to take umbrage. After all, he follows in the tradition of Deacon White. And thanks to a family that never forgot, White got his due with the full attention of Dawson and his fellow proud former Cubs.



**The 1870s-vintage Boston Red Stockings on which Deacon White played.**