



## ***The Veeck Impact on Chicago: Master Of The Joyful Illusion***

*(On Sept. 20, the Chicago Baseball Museum will host a symposium One Family, Two Teams: The Impact of the Veecks on Chicago Baseball at the Chicago History Museum. Sports Illustrated published this story in its July 4, 1960 issue.)*

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In the secret reaches of his private universe, there is little that the dreamer in Bill Veeck says can't be done. His success, his failures, his joys, his sorrows have created an extravagant legend that even for him tends to obscure reality. To the public, Bill Veeck, president of the Chicago White Sox baseball club, is a brashly clamorous individual who has fashioned a brilliant career out of defying the customs, conventions and crustaceans of baseball. It is an authentic yet one-dimensional view. For Veeck is also an intelligent, impetuous, whimsical, stubborn, tough-fibered, tireless individual with a vast capacity for living and a deep appreciation for humanity. He is full of the humor that springs from the unsuppressed human being. To Veeck, baseball is not an ultra-constitutional mission, a crusade, a holy jousting for men's minds, souls and pocketbooks, but simply an exhilarating way to make a living. His approach to the game is seasoned with an almost visceral irreverence, a wit that is sometimes droll, sometimes raffish, sometimes wry or macabre, and sometimes abusive. A few months after emerging from the hospital where his right leg had been amputated, he threw a "coming-out" party. The high point of the party was achieved when Veeck ripped off his artificial leg and nourished it before the startled eyes of his guests. "It itches," he said.

He has the wit and the grace to make fun of what Veeck hath wrought. When he took over the St. Louis Browns in 1951, he warned the fans to "stay away unless you have a strong stomach." Naturally, many fans rushed out to the ball park to see what he was talking about. "They came out to see if the ball club was as bad as I said," he says, "and it was." Later on, while making a public appearance in New York, he apologized for his nervousness. "As operator of the St. Louis Browns," he explained, "I am not used to people." He outlined his strategy for making the Browns a pennant contender. "We've sold half of our ballplayers and hope to sell the rest," he said. "Our secret weapon is to get a



**In 1960, the exploding Co-miskey Park scoreboard burst on the scene.**

couple of Brownies on every other team and louse up the league."

Behind this facade is a man with a highly perceptive vision of baseball's appeal. "This is an illusionary business," Veeck said not long ago. "The fan comes away from the ball park with nothing more to show for it than what's in his mind, an ephemeral feeling of having been entertained. You've got to heighten and preserve that illusion. You have to give him more vivid pictures to carry away in his head." The most exalted illusion of all is satisfaction about the game ("The only guarantee of prosperity in baseball is a winner"), but that illusion, says Veeck, must be augmented by a feeling that it was fun to be at the ball game. In support of this conviction, Veeck has given fans live lobsters, sway-back horses, 30,000 orchids, a pair of un-crated pigeons, and 200 pounds of ice. He has staged circuses and brought in tightrope walkers and flagpole sitters and jugglers and the Harlem Globetrotters to perform between games of a double-header. He has shot off several kilotons of fireworks (see cover) after night games ("If you win, it's a bonus for the fans on top of the flush of victory; if you lose, they go away talking about the fireworks, not the lousy ball game").

Some of his stunts have been aimed directly at getting customers into his ball parks. In Milwaukee during World War II he introduced "breakfast baseball" for night workers in war plants and had ushers in nightshirts serve coffee and rolls. In Cleveland he spent \$20,000 building the Kiddie Koup—for small children whose mothers wanted to come to the ball park. At St. Louis he held a Grandstand Managers day in which the fans indicated their choice of strategy through boos or cheers when placards were held up that said "Infield back?" or "Bunt?" or "Pinch hitter?" The Browns won the game 5-3, and Veeck promptly dissolved the Grandstand Managers club. "Quit while you're ahead," he advised. "You've got a perfect record now."

At the age of 46, Veeck retains many of the elfin enthusiasms of his youth, though the years have thinned his once-bushy, pinkish-blond hair to a pair of tracks and a tuft of straw and his face has assumed the rutted dignity of a mask done in clay by a slightly arthritic sculptor. But there has been a quickening of the currents and contradictions that make up the man. He is an omnivorous reader who likes to talk out his thoughts. He is a gregarious companion with an introspective streak. He is an undisciplined spirit of spontaneous inspirations, yet he is hard-working—he rises at 4 or 5 o'clock virtually every morning and works 16 to 20 hours a day. He is intensely competitive. Even though he has only one leg, he continues to play tennis and paddle ball. "Does a man stop smiling because he wears false teeth?" he asks. He is painstakingly unpretentious. He works in a onetime reception room in Comiskey Park, answers all his mail himself (writing in longhand on the margins of the letters) and takes phone calls at all hours of the day and night.

Unlike most larger-than-life personalities, Veeck exhibits in public a self-deprecatory air and in private a remarkable sense of charity of heart and purse.

At times he is as insistent and impetuous in his charities as in his business dealings. When one friend refused to allow Veeck to buy him a much-needed automobile, Veeck phoned a children's home in which the friend was interested and announced he would buy anything it needed. "Take a little time to think it over," he said. "Take six hours."

Frequently his greatest labor is preparing a gag to be pulled on a friend. Once Veeck took the trouble to learn a Slovakian dialect so that he could deliver U.S. Senator Frank Lausche's "ethnic group" speech—the one where Lausche spills emotionally and apparently spontaneously into the mother tongue—to a foreign-born audience that Lausche was about to address. Lausche, of course, had to forego his own performance. "He was so mad," says Veeck with tonic glee, "that he wouldn't drive me home."

Veeck has studied—studied, not browsed in—accounting, architecture and "at law." (He discovered a few years ago that some states still offer admission to the bar to persons who study, as Abraham Lincoln did, under a lawyer's guidance and tutoring.) He reads four books a week, has written a novel ("50,000 words and now they want me to put in dialogue!") and played a role in an allegedly professional production of *The Man Who Came to Dinner*. "Putting me on the stage was like putting Sarah Bernhardt on second base," he said at the time. "The theater people would think she was out of place and the baseball people would know it." His conversation ranges restlessly over a seemingly limitless mental horizon, from baseball to philosophy and back again.

It was this restlessness that touched off, some 11 years ago, the intellectual revolution that led to his becoming a convert to Roman Catholicism. "I'd studied everything from Buddhism to Magna Mater," he says. "In fact, I gave quite a bit of thought to Judaism." He approached Catholicism with a healthy skepticism, challenging and even dropping instruction when it did not respond to his intellectual need. "He had the toughest mind I've ever encountered," says the Rev. George Halpin of Chicago, the priest who ultimately brought Veeck into the Church. "He was a great student of comparative religions. He never asked an ordinary question." When Veeck voiced doubts about a single footnote in a 600-page volume on Catholicism, Father Halpin spent three days and probed through 13 books with him in an effort to establish its intellectual validity. "It was a most interesting three months," says Father Halpin of the period of Veeck's instruction.

## **UNSHEATHED CANDOR**

All this mental activity takes place on a sort of subterranean level, the generative but not always visible level of Veeck's nature. On the surface, he remains invincibly *The Clown* and *The Irritant*. His volcanic relations with the other owners in baseball stem not so much from his picaresque approach to the game as to his unsheathed candor. His feud with the New York Yankees started years ago as a professional matter and quickly became a personal one. "George Weiss is a sensitive man and I am an outspoken one," he says. "I'm sure that when I say George is a fugitive from the human race he does not think it is funny." Many owners profess to find his Midas touch distasteful. "He is nothing but a capital-gains gypsy," says one whose own disaffection for money is not pronounced.

That Veeck has a gypsy nature is indisputable. "I've had seven children and no two of them have been born in the same state," he says. That his ball clubs make money is also indisputable. In Cleveland, by Veeck's own testimony, his backers got back \$20 for every \$1 they put into the club. At St. Louis, Veeck bought stock at \$7 a share and sold

it 2 years later for \$12 a share; even when the huge operating losses are included, the transaction netted Veeck and his backers a 38% profit. In Chicago the appraised value of the White Sox rose from \$195 a share to \$450 a share in the first year of Veeck's management. (Veeck paid \$828 a share for the 54% of the stock he controls.) But that he shuffles franchises for profit motive alone is disputable. Veeck sold the Milwaukee Brewers in 1945 because he thought he might restore health to his ailing legs and ailing marriage by dropping out of baseball. He sold the Cleveland Indians in 1949 to raise enough cash to provide trust funds for his three older children and for a final settlement on his divorce. He sold the St. Louis Browns in 1953 at the insistence of an American League cabal led, he claims, by the Yankees.

None of this negates the alienation of Veeck from the community of owners or the real reasons for that alienation: that Veeck is a person of greater dimensions and grander vision than his contemporaries. All this would be tolerable if Veeck fitted the baseball men's image of such an individual—i.e., a failure. But his success offers a suggestion of their own inadequacy and threatens some of the longtime institutions of baseball, such as the domination of the American League by the Yankees. For if other clubs in the league continue to find Veeck's club a better draw than the Yankees, they may undergo a polar shift from domination by the Yankees—who, through the years, have offered them so much money that they couldn't defy Yankee wishes in league councils—to domination by Veeck.

The hostility of the owners is not shared by their players. Veeck is probably the most popular "players' owner" in history. He speaks the players' language without condescension and tends their needs without personal or financial reserve. Once in Milwaukee, Harry (Peanuts) Lowrey, an outfielder demoted to the Brewers by the Chicago Cubs, explained that his poor performance in Milwaukee was due to the fact that he and his family couldn't find a home there. "Move into my place," said Veeck—and promptly moved his own family out so Lowrey's could move in. At Cleveland in 1947 he promised Ken Keltner a bonus of \$5,000 if Keltner hit more than .285. Keltner had a miserable year; he batted only .257. Veeck gave him the bonus anyway—and the next year Keltner batted .297 and helped spur Cleveland to the world championship. "It was the cheapest \$5,000 I ever spent," says Veeck. Another time, Veeck spent \$10,000 arranging for the birth and adoption of illegitimate children sired by three of his ballplayers—"I'd handled about 15 cases like this before but never three in one season!" he says—and then spent \$100,000 of his own money fighting various legal actions just to keep the players' names secret. "We were trying to keep their families from breaking up," he says, "and we did."

### **MOST NOTABLE MUTATION**

Historically, Veeck is perhaps the most notable mutation in baseball. He developed his bizarre techniques out of a sturdy tradition of conservative training and heritage. The only employer he ever knew was Philip K. Wrigley, the correct, conservative owner of the Chicago Cubs. Of him Veeck says: "A very bright man, more about things than about people, but very bright nevertheless." Veeck's father, for 15 years president of the Cubs, was a dignified person who, says Veeck, "was basically in favor of many of the

same things I stand for—a clean ball park, a happy atmosphere. The kidding part I do—well, you must remember we operate in different eras. When my daddy started with the Cubs [as a vice-president in 1917] baseball was just about the only mass sport there was. This meant that your competition was a lot less and of an entirely different nature from today. You didn't have much golfing. You didn't have the huge race tracks and legalized betting of today. You didn't have hunting and fishing in reach of everybody, or sailing and boating. You didn't have radios that you can carry around on a golf course so you can listen to the games but never have to go to one. You didn't have television. It's true, certain things I do would be completely foreign to my father's nature. But he was indoctrinated in a different era and he reacted to it in a different way."

The elder Veeck was a sportswriter working under the name Bill Bailey on the Chicago American when Bill was born on February 9, 1914. Bill had an older brother, Maurice, who was killed in a childhood shooting accident playing cops and robbers. He still has an older sister, Peggy Krehbiel, who lives in Downers Grove, a suburb near Chicago. In his sportswriting days, the senior Veeck was a trenchant critic of the Cubs. "My infant son can throw his bottle farther than this team can hit," he said of one Cub team. Thus needed, the Cubs took Veeck into the organization as a vice-president and, after the 1918 season, raised him to president.

It was in these years that young Bill became attuned to the hidden tempos and secret life that make a ball park pulse with personality. When he was 11, he was helping mail out tickets for ladies' day, a novelty brought to Chicago by his father. In his teens he worked in the stockroom, in the concession stands, in the grandstand hawking popcorn and programs, with the ground crew, any place where his exceptional energies could be harnessed. (In 1929 he lost \$10,000 worth of tickets to the World Series and didn't find them until two months after the season was over.) After hours he went rollicking with many of the players, a raucous, hard-drinking crew. From them he learned all the facts of life and the childlike enthusiasm with which ballplayers explore them. "One thing I tell our sons," says Veeck's wife, Mary Frances, "is that there is nothing they need to keep from their father. There isn't any kind of trouble they can get into that he hasn't seen."

His own father did not approve of all this. When Mr. Veeck took his wife and daughter partying, Peggy would have to rush into the speakeasy and flush the teen-age Bill and his friends out the back way before the elder Veeck walked in. "Bill could never understand why, if it was illegal for his father to be there, it was more illegal for him to be there," says Peggy.

In September 1933 the elder Veeck became ill with leukemia and on October 5 he died. Bill dropped out of Kenyon College and went to work as an office boy for the Cubs at \$17 a week. Eight years later, still in his 20s, he was treasurer of the Cubs and earning \$17,000 a year. He was also a husband and father; in 1935 he had married Eleanor Raymond, a childhood friend from Hinsdale whose horsemanship won her a role as a bareback rider in the Ringling Brothers Circus. "I thought when I married Bill I was leaving the circus," she was quoted as saying some years later. She was wrong. Ideas were burgeoning in Veeck's mind, ideas that won no welcome from the Cubs. "It got,"

Veeck has said, "so that when Mr. Wrigley saw me coming, he automatically said, 'No.' "

## **\$11 AND A TICKET**

In 1939, when he was only 25 years old, Veeck had tried unsuccessfully to buy the White Sox. Two years later, on June 21, 1941, with nothing but \$11 and a ticket to Milwaukee in his pocket, Veeck quit the Cubs. In Milwaukee he blew \$10 partying with newspapermen to celebrate his liberation and imminent purchase of the Milwaukee Brewers of the American Association. At the time the Brewers were, if possible, in worse financial shape than Veeck. They were close to bankruptcy, the league had taken over the franchise, and the bank was about to foreclose. Veeck hurried to the bank to buy the club and get an extension on the loan. He persuaded the bankers that all he really wanted to borrow was time, and he got it. On the strength of this he talked some more and asked for \$50,000. He got that too.

On the night that Veeck took over the Brewers, they drew a total attendance of 22 fans. "They were all people who liked to attend hangings," says Veeck. Within 24 hours he had brought in Charlie Grimm as manager and started building the Legend of Bill Veeck. He shuttled players in and out on almost daily schedules. He cleaned up the ball park. He rocked staid Milwaukee with his zany stunts. He began throwing money around as if he were the last of the great spenders. "Fortunately, in Milwaukee it didn't take an awful lot of money," he says. The ball club remained an indomitable last in 1941, but the next year it shot to within a game of first place. Veeck wiped out all but \$17 of the club's \$135,000 debt, then started earning large profits as the Brewers won three straight American Association pennants and began setting minor-league attendance records. In October 1945, after spending 22 months in the Marines ("I was a four-time buck private"), Veeck sold the Brewers at a personal profit of \$275,000. With this, he temporarily retired from baseball. He bought a ranch in southern Arizona and moved there with Eleanor and their three children.

While Veeck had been fighting with the Marines on Bougainville during World War II, both his legs were attacked by a jungle rot that threatened to dissolve the bones. In addition, his right leg was injured in the recoil of an anti-aircraft gun. Veeck underwent 10 operations, had bone grafts taken for both legs ("I now have very little bone in my right hip"), and suffered as many as 24 penicillin shots a day for five months while lying in traction. Ultimately his left leg was saved but his right leg was amputated about six inches below the knee in November 1946. Since then, Veeck has had seven more operations to pare off more and more of the bone—the last only a week ago. This time the knee itself was sacrificed, and Veeck may virtually have to learn to walk again.

If Arizona partially saved his legs, it could not save his marriage. Eleanor was an intelligent young woman who, as it developed, was considerably more introverted than her husband. "Eleanor just didn't understand Bill's moods," says one of Veeck's close friends. After a period of separation, the couple was divorced in 1949. At about that time Bill met Mary Frances Ackerman, a onetime drama student who was a press agent for the Ice Capades. They dated almost daily for two weeks, then Bill asked her to

marry him. The proposal was enormously complicated by the fact that Mary Frances was a Catholic and Bill a divorced man. Ultimately, the Church made a thorough investigation of Veeck's first marriage and found that a civil but not a sacramental union had taken place: neither Bill nor his first wife had been baptized nor had they been married in a church, so he was granted the Pauline Privilege to re-wed. In the meantime, as a test of his faith and his love, Veeck refrained from seeing Mary Frances for six months. They finally were married by Father Halpin in the Cathedral at Albuquerque in the spring of 1950.

## **THE INDIANS AND THE BROWNS**

Long before that he had returned to baseball. In June 1946, less than a year after selling the Brewers, he acquired the Cleveland Indians for \$1,750,000. "The team looked hopeless," he says, "so I bought it." Within 2 years the Indians had won their first pennant in 28 years, won the World Series and set an alltime attendance record of 2,620,627. Because of his need for cash, Veeck sold the Indians for \$2.2 million in 1949 and then, almost as if he had a drive for self-immolation, bought the cellar-bound St. Louis Browns for \$1.5 million in mid-1951. "They were the worst-looking collection of ballplayers I've ever seen," he said. "It hurt to look at them." Very few people did.

By the end of 1952, however, attendance was up 60%, and the Browns were outdrawing the Detroit Tigers, Chicago White Sox and Philadelphia Athletics on the road. Veeck, meanwhile, was learning some harsh facts of economic life. He was, in fact, engaged in a fight for survival. In February 1953, Fred Saigh, who was about to go to prison on an income tax evasion charge, sold his St. Louis Cardinals to the Anheuser-Busch Brewery. That altered the balance of power in St. Louis. Veeck felt he could compete against the limited resources of Saigh, but he knew that he could not compete against the virtually unlimited resources of the brewery. His only alternative was to move the Browns out of town. In March 1953 he asked permission of the American League to move to Baltimore and saw a unanimous agreement turned into a 5-3 vote against him. He traced the switch to the Yankees. "Let's put it nicely," he has said. "They figured they could beat my brains out—and they did."

The technique was simple: by forcing Veeck to remain in St. Louis, where he was now unpopular because of his plans to move, they could force him to near bankruptcy. They were right. Within a few weeks Veeck found he was getting three cancellations for season tickets for every new one he sold. He had to sell some of his players, then he had to sell his ball park to the St. Louis Cardinals for \$800,000 and rent it back for \$175,000 a year. He sold his stocks and bonds, his ranch in Arizona, his annuities and much of his personal property. Rudie Schaffer, long his closest aide, mortgaged his own home to help meet payrolls. Unable to raise more than 10% of the \$30,000 asking price for a likely-looking shortstop in the Negro league, Veeck told the Cubs about Ernie Banks "to keep him out of the American League." By June, attendance had dropped 37%, Veeck had lost \$400,000 of his own money in the club and he was being hanged in effigy regularly at the Browns' ball games. "It was the most difficult year of my life," he says.

At length, their sense of duty only half-fulfilled, the Yankees relented. They allowed the

American League to allow the Browns to move to Baltimore if Veeck did not move with them. He and his backers agreed to sell out for \$2.5 million.

It was a cankerous personal defeat for Veeck, but within two weeks he was back in baseball as a \$1,000-a-month special assistant to Phil Wrigley, seeking ways of getting major-league baseball to the West Coast. Veeck spent 14 months and \$75,000 of his own money on the project. At one point, in the hope that American League owners loved money more than they hated him, Veeck teamed up with Hotelman Conrad Hilton and Construction Man Henry Crown to try to buy the foundering Philadelphia Athletics and move them to Los Angeles. But the league blocked him and arranged for the club to be sold instead to the late Yankee landlord, Arnold Johnson, who moved the Athletics to Kansas City.

Subsequently Veeck failed in a bid to buy the Cleveland Indians again ("We were really setting a price so that Hank Greenberg could sell his stock"), saw his high bid for the Detroit Tigers (\$5.5 million cash or \$6 million "on time") turned down for a lower bid ("Sometimes you run into riverboat gamblers," he said bitterly) and failed to buy the Ringling Brothers Circus for \$21.1 million.

## **A SWIFT MOVE**

Not until Dorothy Comiskey Rigney tired of her bitter legal battle with her brother Charles over control of the White Sox did Veeck get his chance to acquire a club again. In the winter of 1958-59 he moved in swiftly and with half a dozen backers bought the 54% of the club controlled by Dorothy for \$2.7 million.

The fiery illusions of fun he built around the game in Chicago—notably the exploding scoreboard, which fires off \$60 worth of skyrockets and aerial bombs every time a White Sox player hits a home run—are now part of the durable Veeck legend. But some others of Veeck's changes were quite subtle. "Anything that happens in a ball park, from the moment a fan arrives to the moment he leaves, can ruin the impression of fun that you're trying to build," he says. "This requires an attention to detail." He offers, as an example, the metamorphosis of the dun-colored roach pit that was Comiskey Park. "If you remember, it was dark and dank when you came in; it was like going into a dungeon," he said. "So we painted everything under the grandstand white, tore down a few useless pillars and ripped out everything that hung overhead, that loomed over you. We wanted to get away from that dungeonlike atmosphere to one of cleanliness and airiness." This year, to promote the airy feeling, he painted the entire park white, inside and out, and he has promised to "turn night into day around here." Other details he labored over ranged from putting cloth towels in the washrooms instead of paper towels (cost: \$500 a month just "to get a little extra class") to killing the smell of rancid butter around popcorn stands ("We tried 15 chemical sprays before we found one that worked") and establishing contact with the radar screen around Chicago in order to get early warning of approaching rainstorms so ushers could hand out plastic rain capes to fans in rain-exposed areas. "The important thing is to give them the capes before it starts raining, not after they've got wet," he says. "The intrinsic value of the capes [they cost 4¢ apiece] is nothing. But the fact that you went out of your way to protect people,

even that you're breeding some black art to know when it's going to rain, is important to the fans."

The impact of his methods was demonstrated in an important area: banishing the historic dislike women had for Comiskey Park. To overcome this attitude, Veeck worked on a variety of details. He stationed ushers just inside the gates to look for women who appeared confused and to escort them personally to their seats. He cleaned up and re-decorated the once-nauseating powder rooms. He installed lighting in them that was subtly flattering ("A woman likes to think she's looking her best when she goes back into the world") full-length mirrors ("so she can check her seams"), and different levels of vanity tables. He gave away orchids and roses, let mothers in free on Mother's Day, gave away green stamps (instead of cigars or beer) on certain Sundays. The result was that the number of women attending games at Comiskey Park tripled (to about 420,000) and the proportionate number went up from less than 20% to more than 30%.

By far the most vivid part of the illusion which Veeck built up, however, was the bravura defiance of destiny by the 1959 White Sox. Employing an anachronistic philosophy of speed, pitching and defense, the White Sox won their first pennant in 40 years and drew 1,423,144 fans to Comiskey Park, double the attendance of 1958. The gross income at the gate alone—excluding the radio-TV rights and concession sales—soared to \$3,587,400, an increase of 147% over the previous year. At the same time the Cub ticket sale decreased less than 7% (to a total of \$1,367,000) in 1959. Thus Veeck's techniques, combined with the success of the White Sox, produced \$2,039,800 worth of new business for baseball in Chicago.

Ever since moving to Chicago in March 1959, the Veecks have lived in a three-bedroom apartment on the ninth floor of a lake-front hotel on Chicago's South Side. They have four children, ranging from 21 months to 9 years old. At home, as in baseball, the impact of Veeck's personality is electric ("All of our children learned to say 'Daddy' first," says Mary Frances) but, in her own way, Mary Frances exercises the tyranny of the weak over the strong with great subtlety. She does all the personal buying for her husband, from toothbrushes to the 50 white sport shirts and the half dozen identical blue sports coats and slacks that Bill needs every year ("I haven't bought anything in 10 years," says Bill. "Not even a razor blade"). But she has never insisted that Bill wear a tie, not even at their nuptial Mass. She has achieved only one change: she succeeded in switching Bill from tan sports clothes to navy blue "because navy blue was simply more practical for handling by the wife in this family."

The only routine that Veeck follows is early in the morning. Usually he spends 60 to 90 minutes bathing the shrunken stump of his right leg. This is the time when he gets a chance to read and reflect, when the reality of Bill Veeck—the substance behind and beyond the legend—becomes apparent and the far reaches of his private universe are explored. "I'm for the dreamer," he said not long ago. "The only really important things in history have been started by the dreamers. They never know what can't be done."