

# BASEBALL UNDER GLASS

## *'69 Cubs truly become 'ghost team' with death of Hickman*

*By George Castle, CBM Historian  
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The recent death of ex-Cub Jim Hickman at 79 puts shudders in you for more reasons than simply losing an eminently decent man who richly deserved the nickname “Gentleman Jim.”

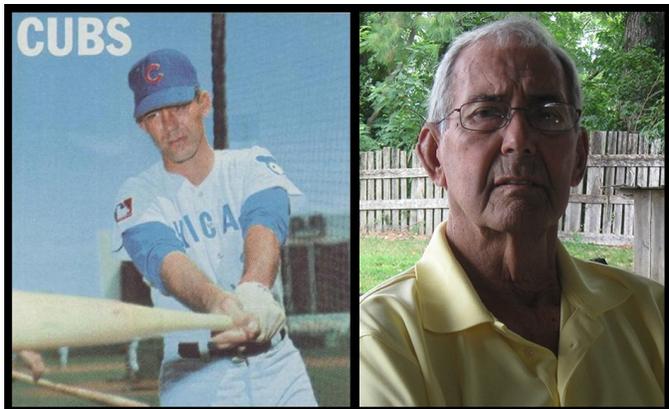
With the death of Hickman, one of the best clutch hitters in Chicago baseball history, the ranks of the fabled 1969 Cubs are really thinning. Fifteen players from that team are now deceased.

That stark fact cannot be avoided due to the passage of time. Still much talked about, the 1969 season was 47 years ago. Almost a half century. Two full generations. That’s a long time ago by any standard.

To put 47 years in perspective it was 47 years from the end of World War II to 1992. The war veterans were all senior citizens by then. Or 47 years from 1900 to post-war 1947. Or 47 years from the end of the Civil War in 1865 with the constitutional emancipation of slaves to semi-modern times in 1912. By then, the telephone, light bulb, motion picture film, sound recording, autos, airplanes and radio were invented.

Those of us who were kids in 1969 are slipping beyond middle age. We cling to Chicago’s top “ghost team” – greater than the 1919 Black Sox – because of the recriminations of losing first place to an upstart Mets team the Cubs led by 10 games on Aug. 13, 1969. Now the Cubs are a “ghost team” for another reason – due to all the departed personalities.

Hickman is the third regular after the diabetes-plagued Ron Santo and Mr. Cub himself to leave us. [My interview with him for this site in Aug. 2014](#) remains the best-read feature the Chicago Baseball Museum ever presented.



**Jim Hickman's passing at 79 has hastened the thinning of the ranks of the '69 Cubs.**

Fans have never forgotten the humble Tennessee farmer who slugged 10 homers in Aug. 1969 to keep the team from falling apart even earlier than it did. That clutch performance, rivaling that of Keith Moreland's in Aug. 1984, was only a preview of one of the best all-around slugging seasons in Cubs history.

Starting out in center field in 1970 with the unnecessary off-season acquisition of right fielder Johnny Callison, Hickman took off like a Saturn V rocket and hardly leveled off the rest of the season. Succeeding the aging and hobbled Ernie Banks as the first-base regular at mid-season, Hickman slugged 32 homers, amassed 115 RBIs, scored 102 runs, batted .315, drew 93 walks and had a .419 on-base percentage.

He earned a backup All-Star berth, earning a slice of fame as the batter who singled to center, allowing Pete Rose to smash into AL catcher Ray Fosse for the most memorable game-deciding home-plate collision in baseball history.

Hickman was retired just eight years when cameo '69 catcher Randy Bobb was the first of that team to pass away – tragically -- at 34 in 1982 from injuries sustained in a California auto accident. Willie Smith, whose Opening Day pinch homer touched off the amazing year, died at 66 in 2006. Funnyman backup catcher Gene Oliver, who once said he'd jump off the newly-built John Hancock Center if the Cubs didn't win in '69, also passed on. Two at-bat pinch hitter Charley Smith is gone.



**Cameo catcher Randy Bobb (left) was the first of the '69 Cubs to pass away, at 34 in 1982, while fourth starter Dick Selma (right) died of liver cancer at 57.**

Other members of this list are pitchers. Fourth starter Dick Selma died of liver cancer at 57 in 2001. "Greybeard" relievers Ted Abernathy and Hank Aguirre ("the Ab and Ag Show" according to Jack Brickhouse) also are departed, along with Joe Niekro, Joe Decker, Alec Distaso, Don Nottebart and knuckleballer Ken Johnson.

### **Recorded memories are priceless**

As a sports journalist and historian, you never can purge emotion out of your portfolio. In addition to Banks, Santo and Hickman, through the years I talked to Willie Smith, Selma, Oliver and Abernathy. Their recorded memories on my "Diamond Gems" syndicated radio show are priceless.

Of all the '69 coaches and manager Leo Durocher, only first-base coach Joey Amalfitano at 82 is still with us. The first to go, genial Rube Walker – a leukemia victim at 42 in 1971 – is connected with Hickman. Walker spotted a flaw in Hickman's swing in mid-1969. The correction led to Hickman's emergence as a dangerous hitter. Deceased are third-base coach Pete Reiser and pitching coach Joe Becker.

The many decades also claimed the majority of media types who brought the news of the '69 Cubs to the masses. The entire on-air WGN crew of Brickhouse, Lloyd Pettit, Vince Lloyd and Lou Boudreau have long passed. TV director Arne Harris was still on the job in 2001 when he died suddenly in the company of Chip Caray at a restaurant. Radio producer Jack Minevich is also gone. Fortunately, WGN sports editor Jack Rosenberg and Harris supervisor Bill Lotzer are still with us with all their wits at 90.

To the best of my knowledge, '69 Cubs beat writers George Langford of the Tribune and Ray Sons and George Vass are still alive. Long gone are Jerome Holtzman and Edgar Munzel of the Sun-Times, Richard Dozer of the Tribune and James Enright of Chicago Today. Durocher's chief antagonist, Chicago Today columnist Rick "The Ripper" Talley, died young at 61 in 1995. Talley wrote the season's first commemorative book, "The Cubs of '69," in 1989. Also gone are Sun-Times columnists Bill Gleason and Jack Griffin, Tribune columnists Dave Condon and Robert Markus, and columnist John P. Carmichael of the Daily News.

Almost all the broadcasters who brought us highlights of the Cubs' triumphs on the 10 p.m. news and the first era of recorded interviews have departed. Wendell Smith, to whom many turned to watch the WGN game videotape, died way back in 1972. Bruce Roberts of WBBM-TV and Bill Frink of WLS-TV are deceased. Only Johnny Morris, then working for WMAQ-TV, soldiers on in his early 80s.

Meanwhile, Red Mottlow, the first radio sportscaster to bring a tape recorder to the locker room, died at 76 of a fast-spreading brain tumor in 2003. The staccato-voiced Mottlow, who co-hosted "Diamond Gems" for five seasons up to his death, used to race from Wrigley Field to Top 40 WCFL-Radio's Marina City studios after 1969 games to play post-game interviews on his 5:30 p.m. sportscast. He claimed he was the only radio reporter starting out the game at the Ken Holtzman no-hitter on Aug. 19, 1969. I think of the fiery Mottlow almost every day.

This long necrology puts a premium on keeping the memories flowing from those '69 players still alive. Our friend Al Yellon of BleedCubbieBlue.com assembled a list of the living – it's still a big majority of players. Hall of Famers Billy Williams, 78, and Fergie Jenkins, 73, are still active and about with regular appearances. Glenn Beckert survived a scare from a fall 15 years back, but tough "Bruno" makes it back to Chicago from his Florida retirement home a few times. Bill Hands, presently profiled on this site, is still actively involved at 76 in his three-generation family business.

Ex-outfielder Al Spangler at 83 is the oldest living '69 Cub. The youngest at 66 is Oscar Gamble, touted by Durocher as the "next Willie Mays" in 1969 before falling out of favor post-season due to off-the-field behavior. The other living '69 Cubs are Randy Hundley, Don Kessinger, Ken Holtzman, veterinary Dr. Rich Nye, Phil Regan, Don

Young, Paul Popovich, Jimmy Qualls, Adolfo Phillips, Nate Oliver, Bill Heath, Jimmie Hall, Rick Bladt, Manny Jimenez, John Hairston, Jim Colborn, Archie Reynolds, Dave Lemonds and Gary Ross.

Williams, Hundley, Nye and Popovich settled in the Chicago area after retirement. Jenkins is in town frequently. Holtzman also was established in business in the northern suburbs post-career, but moved to his native St. Louis in the late 1990s after a divorce.

Over the decades, I'm proud to say I got to know Williams, Jenkins, Beckert, Holtzman, Nye and Regan well. I tried to ask Regan about his old Vaseline ball when he was Cubs pitching coach in 1997-98. "I don't talk off the record," the Vulture replied, even after Williams showed me how the greasy kids' stuff was transferred from the closer's uniform onto the baseball.

Of the list of living '69 Cubs, I was frustrated in never tracking down Phillips, whose meteoric rise and fall was symbolic of the era. I also never was able to make contact with Nate Oliver, Heath, Hall, Bladt, Jimenez, Lemonds and Ross.

More names inevitably will transfer from the living to the deceased list. That's never a good feeling. Yet the '69 Cubs won't ever truly die so long as one fan remains alive who witnessed their memorable journey.