



Bill Veeck: Remembering the good, the bad and the in-between on his 100th birthday

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A man with the ultimate positive image as a friend of the baseball fan, Bill Veeck might have been the first to say that, yeah, he had feet (in his case, one foot) of clay.

A speed reader of books, Veeck knew all about protagonists who had many sides, not every one of them heroic. It made a balanced portrayal for the book consumer. In that case, Veeck, whose 100th birthday is being marked Feb. 9, was the ultimate balanced man.

His baseball-owner opponents would have added “un” to the front of “balanced.” In the process of bearding the game’s establishment, in attempting to be in front of trends to make money, draw more fans and advance a personal, liberal philosophy, star promoter Veeck both succeeded and failed.

In doing so, he became one of the most impactful men in Chicago baseball history. He was a true Renaissance man, whose life impacted more than just events on the diamond.

Veeck saved the White Sox for Chicago when there were no other local buyers in 1975. He gave Hall of Famer Tony La Russa his managerial start in 1979. Veeck prodded Harry Caray to start singing in the seventh inning, a tradition that has long outlasted Caray’s death. He supervised the construction and installation of the iconic Wrigley Field bleachers, ivy and scoreboard.

On the flip side, Veeck entertained thoughts of selling the Sox to out-of-town interests. Without a personal fortune, he operated the team on such a skimpy budget he could not compete in the modern baseball era. And amid the politics of his first Sox ownership, he barred the last, and perhaps, best Comiskey from running the franchise he had revived before Veeck’s arrival.



A typical Bill Veeck image from his prime. He was nicknamed "Sport Shirt Bill" for his refusal to wear ties in that button-down, dress-up era.

Other things upon which Veeck put his imprint cut both ways. What was a promotion to boost sagging old Comiskey Park attendance to take advantage of then-wunderkind DJ Steve Dahl's popularity literally blew up in Veeck's face in 1979 with the Disco Demolition riot. But even with the torn-up field and forfeited game to the Detroit Tigers, the fiasco ended up as Veeck's best-remembered, and talked-about, promotion.

Living hard, sleeping little and smoking a lot, Veeck somehow made it to 71 before he succumbed to cancer on Jan. 2, 1986. In the nearly three decades to follow, he has been remembered with an honorary "Bill Veeck Drive" on the west side of U.S. Cellular Field. But there is no permanent, substantial memorial to "Baseball's Barnum" anywhere in Chicago.

As per the Veeck style, a commemorative plaque or structure, and certainly not a statue, is not a honor for which his family would campaign.

Mary Frances not keen on memorial

"The amount of mail that I still get is enough," said Veeck's wife and soul mate, Mary Frances Veeck, mother of six of his eight children, in a brief Feb. 2014 interview. "(A memorial) is the last thing he'd want.

"He was always very appreciative of the fans. He just took life as it rolled along. We have a great place, Cooperstown, to honor the baseball people."

Even after rankling the Lords of the Game in so many different incarnations over the decades, Veeck's contributions to baseball were considered Hall of Fame-worthy. He was enshrined posthumously in 1991.

Yet Veeck's life might have taken a different timeline, with an equally powerful impact on Chicago baseball, had father William L. Veeck, Sr. had not died too early at 56 in 1933 due to a fast-spreading leukemia that was beyond treatment of that era's medicine.



William L. Veeck, Sr. (right) was called "daddy" by his son long after his 1933 death. The elder Veeck was the Baseball Barnum's role model in so many ways. Meanwhile, Margaret Donahue (left), baseball's first significant female executive, was a Bill Veeck front-office mentor.

Referring to his father as his beloved "daddy" 'till the end of his own life, the younger Veeck grew up in a tumultuous Cubs era while his old man served as Cubs president for 14 years starting in 1919. The wide-eyed, flaming-haired young Veeck took it all in from Wrigley Field's box seats or listening to celebrity guests at the family's Hinsdale, Ill.

home. William L. Veeck, Sr. was the most dynamic baseball executive of his era. Not only did he help build the powerhouse teams of the late 1920s and 1930s, Veeck also was an innovator in a less flamboyant manner than the way for which his son was renowned decades later.

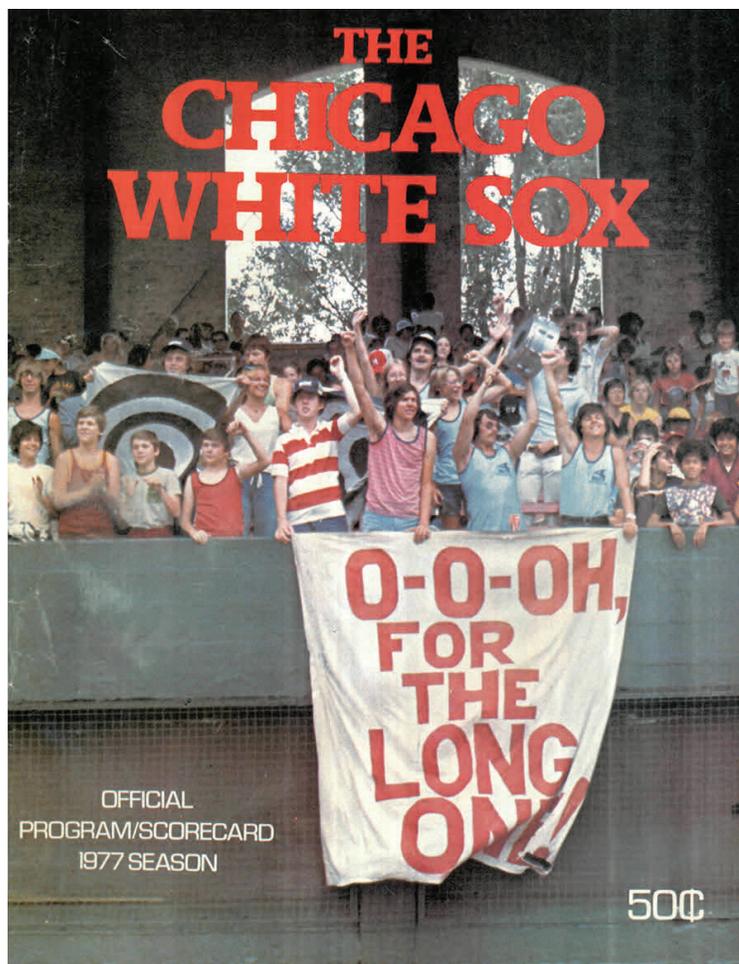
The elder Veeck supervised the expansion and double-decking of Wrigley Field. He pioneered extensive radio coverage of the Cubs at a time most owners feared free broadcast exposure would hurt their attendance. In concert with trusted aide Margaret Donahue, baseball's first significant female executive, he instituted the wildly popular Ladies Day and the sale of season tickets.

"He would have been in the Hall of Fame if people who ran clubs were honored (in past decades)," Mary Frances Veeck said of William L. Veeck, Sr.

But times have changed in the Hall of Fame voting. Executives have been voted into Cooperstown. William L. Veeck, Sr. has a chance to become one of the two father-son combinations enshrined. He could be elected by the Pre-Integration Veterans' Committee in Dec. 2015. The Chicago Baseball Museum will campaign hard for "The Unsung Hero" of Major League Baseball, who was a major influence on his better-known son.

Imagine: 2 generations of Veecks running the Cubs

Nobody knows if Bill Veeck would have worked for his father after college had the latter lived much longer. But it's entirely possible the two-generation team might have operated the Cubs under owner Philip K. Wrigley, with the elder Veeck grooming his son to take over after his retirement. Wrigley entrusted William L. Veeck, Sr., to run the team's day to day affairs, top to bottom, as he had done for his late father, William Wrigley, Jr. Had Bill Veeck been groomed to take over, P.K. Wrigley would have also trusted that line of succession.



Bill Veeck rent-a-players Richie Zisk and Oscar Gamble answered the Sox fans' pleas with 61 "long ones," out of the 192 homers the 1977 South Side Hit Men slugged in the memorable season.

In the real timeline, William L. Veeck Sr.'s death ripped open a void that was never filled, and contributed mightily to the franchise's crash that began at the dawn of the 1940s. Unable to find a worthy successor to the elder Veeck, the introverted, baseball-dispassionate Wrigley named himself president, with ultimately disastrous consequences still negatively rippling through two successive ownerships.

Bill Veeck left college early and signed on as an \$18-a-week office boy for the Cubs. Enough of his father's forward-thinking philosophy was embedded in the next generation. With Donahue a front-office mentor, he worked his way up to team treasurer, in time for his de facto commemorative structure. After envisioning ivy-covered Wrigley Field walls as early as 13, Veeck had real brick walls on which to affix the plants when the bleachers were constructed in 1937 to replace the old football-style open-air seats. Adding in the green manual scoreboard, these features are protected by the Chicago City Council's Landmark Committee as long as Wrigley Field stands.

But without his father to guide him upward with Wrigley gratefully signing off on the promotion, there was no Cubs presidency, no control of the team to which Veeck could aspire. In the end, he never lost his youthful loyalty to the Cubs. Veeck may have had that unfulfilled desire to run the Chicago National League Ballclub and fill his "daddy's" shoes. In fact, while out of the game in the 1960s, reports had Veeck interested in owning just two teams: the Cubs and the Washington Senators, closest franchise to his Maryland home. Phil Wrigley, however, would not sell, and rated Wrigley Field Bears tenant George Halas as his No. 1 suitor if he ever changed his mind.

With his obvious No. 1 choice cut off, "Sport Shirt Bill" -- a nickname because, like Ted Williams, he refused to wear a tie -- proved restless like any twentysomething with ambition. He began his journey throughout baseball, where he would cement his reputation as a maverick. Unfortunately, he also would become an owner vagabond, never taking up real roots anywhere and almost always short of cash to run a contender-level big-league franchise.



George Castle (right) talks to an appropriately-dressed Bill Veeck when he came full circle to sit in Wrigley Field's center-field bleachers in 1981. Veeck and wife Mary Frances hung out with Cubs fans in the bleachers the next four seasons.

Wanderlust begins in Milwaukee

First was ownership of the minor-league Milwaukee Brewers, where Veeck was reunited with old chum Charlie Grimm, promoted to Cubs manager after his father had

fired Rogers Hornsby in Aug. 1932. World War II Marine service and the amputation of his right leg as the aftermath of the recoil of an anti-aircraft gun preceded his first big-league ownership acquisition: the Cleveland Indians. Veeck was able to put his own philosophy of breaking baseball's color line into effect.

Branch Rickey had begun his own integration plan with Jackie Robinson's signing in the Dodgers organization as early as Oct. 1945, before Veeck owned the Indians. Cleveland was hardly an automatic civic laboratory for successful integration, but Veeck moved soon after Robinson's 1947 debut by signing second baseman Larry Doby. He became the American League's first African-American player with his debut at old Comiskey Park on July 5, 1947. A plaque honoring Doby at that spot on the northeast corner of Shields and 35th Street would be another fitting permanent recognition for Veeck. The Chicago Baseball Museum has had discussions with the White Sox about the installation of the Doby plaque.

Like Rickey, Veeck did not stop with his first signee of color. He inked Satchel Paige, the Negro League's best-known pitcher, in mid-season 1948, with ol' Satch a key acquisition in the Tribe's pennant drive. A Cleveland minor-league signee in '48 was Minnie Minoso, fated to achieve fame in Chicago three years later as the majors' first black Cuban star.

Also coming aboard in 1949 was strongman first baseman Luke Easter. *Chicago Sun Times* writer Edgar Munzel hailed Veeck as the Abe Lincoln of baseball in an April 1949 profile of Veeck's signing of 14 "colored" ballplayers. With Easter and Doby in 1950, the Indians were the first major-league team with a pair of African-Americans each reaching the 25-homer, 100-RBI mark.

Veeck could not take advantage of good attendance in Cleveland to further integrate the Indians. He was forced to sell the team to pay off the divorce settlement from his first wife Eleanor. But with that door closing, another quickly opened

La Russa gets post-graduate baseball education from Veeck

On Aug. 2, 1979, near the end of his second stint as Sox owner, Bill Veeck had the vision to start Tony LaRussa, then just 34, on his own path to the Hall of Fame.

La Russa, piloting the Sox Triple-A franchise in Iowa, was promoted to manage the Sox, succeeding Don Kessinger. LaRussa officially will join Veeck on July 27 in Cooperstown with this year's induction ceremony.

The Chicago Baseball Museum caught up with LaRussa in Jan. 2014 and asked him about Bill Veeck.

"I think the fact that I was going to law school intrigued him," he said. "When I was coaching he often invited me to dinner. I'd be there with him and Paul Richards, Ken Silvestri and Roland Hemond. At those dinners he'd challenge you, he wanted to see if you'd speak your mind when he asked you about something.

"I remember one time we were talking about using the hit-and-run and playing the infield in halfway. Al Lopez, a great Sox manager, didn't like the hit-and-run and Richards, another great Sox manager, didn't like to bring his infield in halfway. I did and had to defend my reasoning behind doing something like that. Looking back, I was being tested by him.

"I also was invited to join him in the Bards' Room sometimes after games. You talk about going to grad school for baseball... that was special. When I went to those you didn't talk, you listened and maybe took some notes. I know when he offered me the job to manage the team again in 1980, he made me promise that I'd finish the final part of the Florida law school exam, which I did. That was important to him. I love Bill and Mary Frances, who became close with my wife."

with his second marriage, to Mary Frances Ackerman, whom he met in her capacity as publicity director of the Ice Capades. The newlyweds moved to St. Louis and Veeck's ownership of the woebegone Browns, with which he gained some of his greatest renown for promotions.

The pre-Disco Demolition promotional highlight of Veeck's career was his hiring of little person (then called a midget) Eddie Gaedel to bat on Aug. 19, 1951 against the Detroit Tigers. The crafty Veeck sent the wire of Gaedel's signing to the American League office in Chicago while it was closed for the weekend and thus could not bar the wee hitter. Somewhere, Veeck would be nodding and smiling with the knowledge Gaedel's 6-foot-3, 220-pound grand-nephew Kyle Gaedele, an Rolling Meadows, Ill. and Valparaiso University product, was a legit outfield prospect in the San Diego Padres' farm system.

Veeck's ultimate goal was to push out the Cardinals and make the Browns the beneficiary of a one-team market in St. Louis. But the sudden decision of Anheuser-Busch, partly out of civic duty, to buy the Cardinals scotched Veeck's best-laid plans. Soon he was forced from the game when resentful fellow owners barred him from moving the Browns. Eventually the franchise did move to its present home in Baltimore as the Orioles, but only after Veeck sold out his ownership share.

Veeck had a short mid-1950s stint as a consultant to Phil Wrigley, where he developed a business plan for baseball's projected expansion into the Los Angeles and San Francisco markets. He finally came home to Chicago, buying Dorothy Comiskey Rigney's majority share of the Sox early in 1959. Along with partner-GM Hank Greenberg, Veeck inherited a consistent contender, strong on pitching, speed and defense, that only needed the dynastic Yankees to have an off-season to finally win the AL flag. That's exactly what happened in '59 as the South Side enjoyed its first World Series in 40 years. In the weeks leading up to the Fall Classic, Veeck proved his affection for the common baseball fan, circulating around the stands at old Comiskey Park to take names of the most regular, loyal Sox fans. He reserved their ability to buy tickets for the World Series.

No billy goat at '59 Series

Veeck also prevented a repeat of the "Billy Goat Curse" from the Cubs' 1945 World Series. In spite of his proclivity for outlandish promotions, Veeck knew barkeep William Sianis was concocting his own publicity stunt when he was told Sianis wanted to bring his mascot billy goat into the '59 Series. Veeck warned Sianis to stay away from Comiskey Park, claiming the police were on the lookout for man and beast.

Veeck truly had "everyman's" tastes. Jerry Saperstein, son of Harlem Globetrotters impresario and Veeck partner Abe Saperstein, once had a planned grand feast of four hot dogs and a giant Coke with ice laid out on the roof of the Sox home dugout. All had been purchased with \$5 given to him by the elder Saperstein.

"I saw Veeck hopping down the aisle (with his artificial leg) and he saw me!" Jerry Saperstein recalled. "What you got there?" he asked. "Man, am I hungry. Mind if I taste one?" he asked. While Bill watched the Sox warm up on the field, he absent-mindedly ate all four of my hot dogs and drank the giant Coke with ice!

“Bill Veeck was not a typical major-league team owner! Sitting in the stands on a summer afternoon watching baseball, he was the happiest man on earth!

“I went back to my Dad and asked for another \$5 bill (to replace the appropriated food). My Dad said I would get sick if he gave me another \$5. I went home hungry!”

Even as Veeck enjoyed the afterglow of '59 with a Chicago record attendance of more than 1.6 million in 1960 and installation of baseball's first exploding scoreboard, he was enmeshed in two critical negatives.

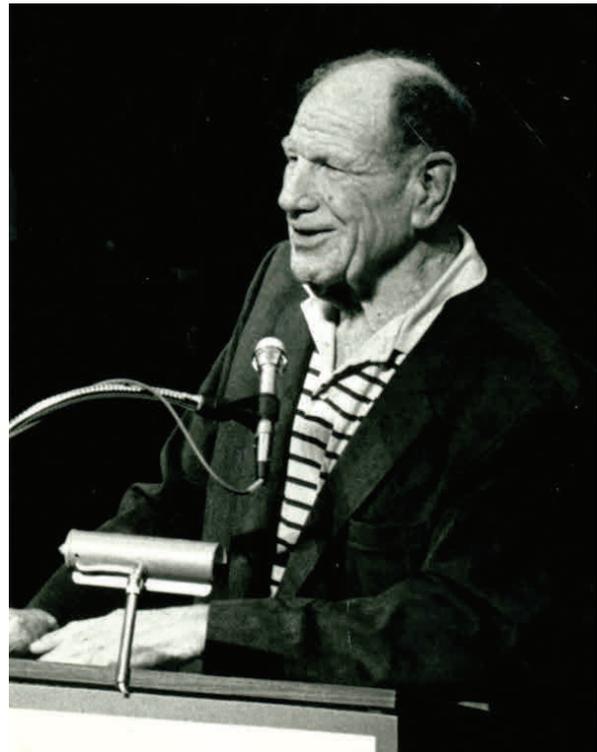
First, he could not find a way to share power with minority owner Chuck Comiskey, who along with GM Frank Lane had laid the foundation for the “Go-Go Sox” earlier in the 1950s. Comiskey found himself at odds with his sister and, unfortunately, with less than 50 percent of the franchise. Comiskey had built up a good baseball organization that only need a little more capital to match the Yankees. The battle over ownership continued until Veeck bowed out, ostensibly due to bad health, in mid-season 1961, with Veeck associate Art Allyn taking over and finally ending the Comiskey family stake in the team.

Ill-advised trades of young hitters

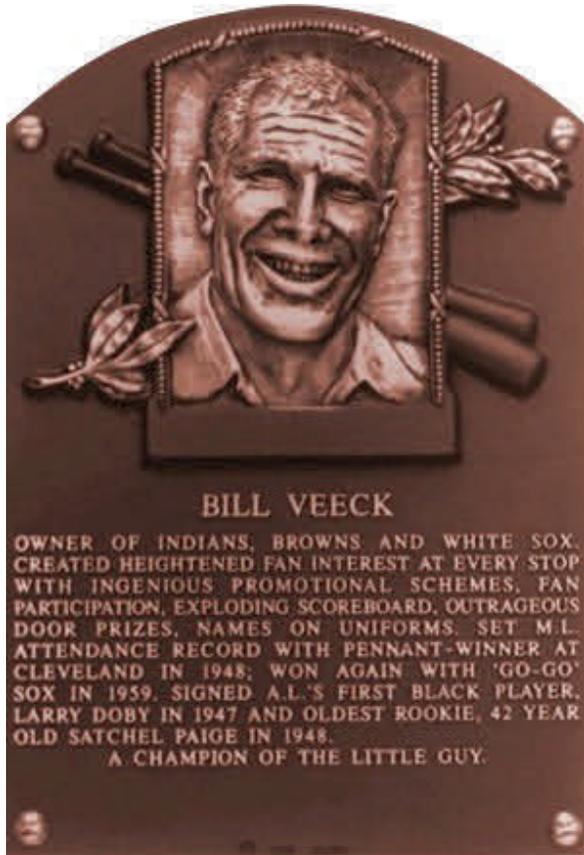
In an effort to forge a repeat after '59, Veeck and Greenberg took an ill-advised route, mortgaging the future by trading away the young products of Comiskey's player-development chain to obtain hard-hitting veterans like Minoso, Roy Sievers and Gene Freese. Dealt away in the process were outfielder Johnny Callison, first basemen Norm Cash and Don Mincher, and catchers Earl Battey and John Romano. If even two of these hitters had stayed and developed along their career lines as Sox, the offensively-challenged South Siders likely would have won at least two more AL pennants in the 1960s.

Veeck's 14 years away from baseball were spent as an author, short-time owner of the Suffolk Downs racetrack and host of a syndicated TV show aired in Chicago on WFLD-TV (Ch. 32) soon after it went on the air in 1966.

Again, he came home, this time as the desperate cavalry to the rescue.



Bill Veeck was in demand as a speaker during and after his ownership days. Here he talks to a gathering at Northeastern Illinois University in Chicago in the early 1980s.



Bill Veeck may have been on the outs with fellow owners over the decades. But Veeck had the last word, beating almost all of them to the Hall of Fame, via this plaque unveiled in 1991.

hand in the purchase was lent by broadcaster Jack Brickhouse, despite his status as the Cubs' announcer. But Brickhouse also had old Sox loyalties. He had broadcast the team on radio in the 1940s and had also been their inaugural TV play by play man on WGN starting in 1948, serving 20 seasons in that role.

Keeping Roland up way past bedtime

Veeck's baseball swan song was promotion-rich and cash-poor. He started by setting up shop with stalwart GM Hemond in the hotel lobby of the 1975 winter meetings, where they made trades in public. More business and storytelling were undertaken until wee-hours closing time at Miller's Pub on Wabash Avenue, near the Palmer House in the Loop. The plucky Hemond will never be able to make up the shut-eye he lost staying at the sleepless Veeck's side on the latter's nocturnal rounds.

The field at old Comiskey was populated by strange sights, ranging from the exploding disco records of the Dahl promotion-gone-wild to belly dancers. "Sodfather" Roger Bossard discovered marijuana growing on the field after being seeded by Disco Demolition participants.

John Allyn, Arthur's brother, had assumed Sox ownership in 1970. After a brief upsurge thanks to Dick Allen's MVP season in 1972, the Sox fortunes collapsed by 1975. Allyn was in danger of not making his final season payroll. He also fired Harry Caray as Sox broadcaster live on Johnny Morris' WBBM-TV (Ch. 2) early-evening sportscast. The AL was poised to move the Sox to Seattle, which was owed a franchise after the expansion Pilots were moved to Milwaukee by Bud Selig in 1970.

At first, Allyn offered the team to GM Roland Hemond and Sox manager Chuck Tanner for \$11 million but they were unable to raise the money. After Hemond and Tanner turned Allyn down, no local owner candidate emerged. That's a disturbing trend that also could affect the Sox in the future if the next generation of the Reinsdorf family decides to sell, according to team historian Rich Lindberg.

Veeck charged back from Maryland with a hastily-assembled syndicate of investors. But the Lords decided they were under-capitalized. With the clock ticking, Veeck rounded up enough extra cash to satisfy the owners. An under-publicized helping

Caray began singing in the seventh while Nancy Faust started playing “Nah, Nah, Nah, Hey-Hey, Good-bye” on the organ. Rent-a-player sluggers Richie Zisk and Oscar Gamble led the 1977 South Side Hit Men to a memorable summer – and Veeck’s only winning record in his final five seasons at the helm. Minoso, well into middle age, was re-activated twice for some scattered at-bats.

But Veeck could not keep up with baseball’s exploding finances as free agency began. He had to sell out. After a flirtation with Denver oilman Marvin Davis, Veeck agreed to sell to the well-heeled DeBartolo family. The AL owners thwarted him one last time, turning down the deal ostensibly due to the DeBartolos’ racetrack interests. That opened the door for the Jerry Reinsdorf-Eddie Einhorn group to swoop in to snare the Sox.

Interestingly, during the winter of 1980-81, Reinsdorf was informed by power-broker Andy McKenna, also close to Veeck, that “another team” in Chicago might be up for sale. That proved to be the Cubs. But the only game Veeck was interested in getting back into was via the cheap seats – the same ones he had helped construct 44 years previously.

Bill Veeck had now come full circle in his life. With Mary Frances at his side, he often sat in Wrigley Field’s center-field bleachers starting in 1981, enjoying the sunshine as if he was a kid at his father’s side. The sight of the renowned Veeck shirtless, sunning himself like any other fan, was both astounding and heartwarming for a curious young sportswriter. You’d never have seen another management type sitting out in the \$1.50 seats. It’s an angle of the game those who play or manage it across the field never experience. Eight years after his career ended, former Cubs second baseman Glenn Beckert visited the right-field bleachers for the first time on Sept. 4, 1983. “I can’t believe the view I’m getting,” he exclaimed.

Holding court with the fans, the Veecks in 1984 saw a first-place Cubs team almost as strong offensively as the lineups William L. Veeck, Sr. had once assembled. In the end, nothing changed. The Cubs fell short of a World Series title.

Veeck no doubt understood better than most. Nothing is assured except experiencing the joy of the journey.