Jim Hickman so self-effacing
he turned down $25-K lifeline from Durocher

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Sometimes one’s personal beliefs, a kind of modesty mixed with pride and self-reliance, would reject a no-strings-attached lifeline when all hell is breaking loose.

That was the stance of Gentleman Jim Hickman when his Henning, Tenn. farm faced foreclosure more than three decades ago. The story was relayed to longtime Hickman family friend Jim Peyton by Phil “The Vulture” Regan, Hickman’s longtime Cubs teammate and roommate.

Leo Durocher, the manager who presided over Hickman’s emergence as an impact Cub, offered him $25,000 to bail out the farm. Hickman declined the gift, even though he relied on his appearances at Randy Hundley’s Arizona fantasy camps to pay the grocery bills amid his financial travails. Hickman loved Durocher for making the offer. In the end, he lost the farm.

Durocher, the most amoral man in baseball in his time, wanted to help probably his most moral former player. He did not connect warmly with too many players. Willie Mays, for sure. On the Cubs, Billy Williams and Glenn Beckert. And Hickman, the spare-part outfielder who out of nowhere blossomed into the team’s best clutch hitter with 10 homers in Aug. 1969. The majority of Cubs at the time were put off by Durocher’s out-of-his-time imperial demeanor. Some had their careers sidetracked outright.
“That did not surprise me,” Peyton said the other day from his home in Ripley, Tenn., population 8,400, six miles away and far larger than the tiny Henning, whose peak was 970 souls.

“Jim Hickman was the most selfless man I have ever met. He was the most humble man I have ever met. Those are two of his greatest qualities, along with his gentlemanliness.”

Peyton knew Hickman coming and going, and a lot of years in-between. He was a childhood friend in Henning of Hickman’s oldest son, Jim, Jr. He knew him as a star Cub, then as a retired ballplayer respectfully called “Big Jim” by his family.

As a Methodist minister running three small churches around Henning and Ripley, Peyton tried in vain to cheer up Hickman after the 2012 death of wife Nita Hickman, his soulmate. He performed an alternately sad and inspiring task, closing the books on Hickman’s mortal life by officiating at his funeral following his June 25 passing at age 79. A copy of the draft of Peyton’s sermon is featured at the end of this story.

The Chicago Baseball Museum published a “Baseball Under Glass” article recently on Hickman’s death, drawing attention to the sad fact that 16 members of the ’69 Cubs had passed. The piece drew by far a record number of page views of any story on the museum web site. The previous record was set by an Aug. 2014 story that turned out to be the last interview of the modest Hickman.

**Minister possesses a mini-Hickman ‘museum’**

Peyton had read both articles, which proved that Hickman had touched so many fans with his style of speak softly, but carry a big stick. And use the latter well in the clutch. Reacting to the latest article, Peyton called the museum. The man of faith operates a kind of informal Hickman museum of his own with a photo collection of shots never seen elsewhere. Some photos were donated by Nita Hickman over the years. The memories of a good man are nearly endless.

“Mr. Hickman would let his bat do the talking,” Peyton said. “The same is true of his religious faith. He never talked or ranted or raved about God, or Jesus or the Bible. He simply let his light shine, let his actions speak louder than words.”

Hickman attended the local Baptist church along with his family. In his view, churches were for praying, not fund-raising or show business.

“The only time he complained to me was about television preachers,” Peyton said. “He did not like them at all. All talk, arrogant, wanting money. He was a man of integrity. He would never compromise his principles. When he refused the money from Leo, he did not have this offer to be the batting coach for the Reds’ minor leagues. I can’t say enough about his virtues, the joy and the peace and the kindness that flowed out of him.”
Peyton figures Hickman’s personality was part natural, part learned from his beloved parents, J.W. and Louise Hickman, whom Peyton described as “very godly, kind-hearted, gentle people.”

The Hickmans owned a restaurant in a community Peyton compartmented to “Mayberry RFD.”

You couldn’t go hungry at the eatery. “Best hamburgers in Henning,” he said, also lauding Louise Hickman’s fried chicken.

The Hickmans employed African-American workers at the restaurant in the 1950s. They may have been people of their times, but they were not racist, according to Peyton.

“There definitely was some racism in Henning,” he said. “But I would say Henning was a progressive little town. The woman who was the mayor of Henning (Marva Temple) wrote an article after Hickman died, praising the Hickman family because they were not racists.

Hickman offers comfort to bereaved African-Americans
Jim Hickman took the concept of treating one’s fellow man as you would want to be treated several steps further.

“One thing Jim would do was when an African-American died, he would show up at the church or the home, and offer his sympathy to the family,” Peyton said. “That did not happen very often at all (for white Southerners).”

The African-American community in Henning was old, established – and famous. Roots author Alex Haley spent his a few years of his boyhood in Henning. The town water tower advertises the community as the home of Haley and Hickman.

Whenever Hickman reached across the racial divide, he was performing yet another make-good deed for an horrific American tragedy that predated Haley's mother's family coming to town. Henning was near the old Civil War stronghold Ft. Pillow. In 1864, several hundred black Union troops were massacred while trying to surrender to the conquering Confederate forces of Gen. Nathan Bedford Forrest.
Every day of his life, Hickman did not have to make a social statement. But his quiet personality made an impact in other ways. His house was almost like a neighborhood sports center. Peyton played catch and basketball with Hickman in his yard. When the weather was bad, Hickman set up a room in the house where his four sons and their friends could let off steam athletically without breaking the furniture or windows.

“All the neighborhood boys would come over and play in the yards,” Peyton said. “Mr. Hickman would put football helmets on all four of his boys. This guy named Lacey told me this story. He was trying to tackle the second oldest (Hickman son), Bill. He grabbed him by the face-mask and pulled him down. Most fathers would have gotten angry to see another kid jerking on his child’s helmet. Mr. Hickman pulled him aside very quietly and calmly and said, ‘Son, that’s called face-masking. That would cost us 15 yards in a penalty.’

“Lacey said I never saw Jim Hickman get angry. I never saw him yell at the kids. All of the kids adored him. He was an instructor instead of a disciplinarian. He never raised his voice. Lacey said ‘I never face-masked again because I understood what it was.’”

Hickman himself was a near-renaissance youth sports athlete. He quarterbacked his high-school team. He also played freshman basketball at Mississippi. Thus the 1969 Cubs had two Ole Miss basketball connections, the other being shortstop Don Kessinger, in the starting lineup.

**Hitting it a long way in baseball, golf**

With his strength, Hickman launched several of the longest homers in Wrigley Field history onto Kenmore Avenue. But he also applied that ability to other sports.
“You talk about strong shoulders,” Peyton said. “The people who played golf with him here said he, even as a man in his 60s and 70s, could hit a golf ball into outer space. If he had more training, he probably could have played pro golf. He loved golf, and his son Joey is a pro golfer.”

Some athletic feats were beyond Hickman’s talent. He rated Bob Gibson and Nolan Ryan the toughest pitchers he faced. He handled the young Ryan Express with his usual quiet humor. One day Ryan was typically throwing more than 100 mph. The plate umpire called a pitch Hickman really did not see a strike. He turned to the arbiter. “The ball sounded kind of high,” he said.

Hickman was truly busy with sports, farming and later coaching in the Cincinnati Reds farm system. But no matter what his success or setbacks totaled, the bottom line in his life was wife Nita. They were complementary in their family. Peyton described Nita Hickman as the disciplinarian. She also was chauffeur. Piloting a station wagon, Nita Hickman somehow kept order among the four boys in the long trip as she drove them up the interstate to Chicago to spend summers with their father.

When Nita fell ill in 2012, her husband never left her side.

“He was so devoted to his wife he never left the hospital in Memphis,” Peyton said. “He stayed there eight to 10 weeks. He stayed in the room.

“After she died, I believe he literally died of a broken heart. He would go to her grave every day. He’d go at night. Summertime, rain, snow, he’d go to her grave. He didn’t do well alone. He would give in to some depression, loneliness, boredom. He would go over to the cemetery until he was physically unable to go. He would go over and talk to her at the grave.”

Hickman’s emotional state was apparent in 2014. When contacted for the interview, his family said he dined with them every night to prevent him from eating alone in his
home. Hickman did appear at Wrigley Field in 2014 for the ballpark’s 100th anniversary celebration. Former teammate Bill Hands said Gentleman Jim appeared somewhat downcast.

**Strong grip to the end**
Peyton did his best to offer spiritual help.

“I would always have a prayer with him when I’d leave. I prayed with him three times in the last two weeks of his life. The last time was when he was in the Jackson-Madison County (Tenn.) General Hospital. He was unable to talk to me. But he grabbed my hand with a strong grip and looked me right in the eye. He was wheezing and had fluid buildup in his lungs. He couldn’t get his breath.

“I said, ‘Mr. Hickman, you have been the role model for so many young men by your attitude. I love you. I thank you for all the kindness you’ve always shown me.’ He couldn’t talk to me, but he blinked his eyes and gripped my hand like he knew exactly what I said. Two days later, he died.”

Peyton had a bad feeling this day would come. In addition to losing Nita, Hickman had pain in his hips and back. “I think he was just a worn-out ballplayer and a broken-hearted husband,” Peyton said.

How to sum up Hickman’s life was not a quick project for Peyton. Knowing the clock was ticking, he took extra care like nothing else with his sermon. Among the listeners at the service were ex-Cubs teammate Phil Regan and Ron Swoboda, an ex-Mets teammate and determined New York foe of Hickman’s in 1969. The Cubs themselves did not forget Hickman, sending a floral arrangement to the funeral in the shape of the "C" in team red, white and blue colors.

“I began working on Mr. Hickman’s funeral sermon a year and four months before he died,” he said. “I wanted to give my best in thoughtfulness and preparation. I didn’t want to go up there and just flap my jaws.”

No, that wouldn’t be in keeping with Jim Hickman’s style. Make every word count and have people remember you by your actions and your good soul. Peyton’s thoughts about a Cub who meant so much to so many are reprinted on the next page.
A longtime friend's tribute to a good man

Following is a reproduction of the draft of Jim Peyton's funeral sermon for Jim Hickman. The CBM is reprinting the draft to show the care a clergyman takes in a fitting tribute.