By George Castle, CBM Historian
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You can’t tell if Jim Hickman’s voice over the phone is dimmed by age. That west Tennessee drawl has always been soft and understated, low-decibel and manners-based.

That’s one reason why Hickman has been known since his impactful Cubs days as “Gentleman Jim.” But there’s another nickname used by his close-at-hand extended family that displays both respect given and received: “Big Jim.”

On the other end of the line, in a Henning, Tenn. made famous by broadcasters Jack Brickhouse and Vince Lloyd, and writers like Jerome Holtzman, Edgar Munzel, Richard Dozer and James Enright, the 77-year-old Hickman was asked how his career turned on a dime exactly 45 years ago. “As the merry men of Wrigley Field roll on and on,” – the cheery Brickhouse proclamation after another mid-summer 1969 victory -- Hickman’s bat suddenly started carrying the first-place Cubs lineup.
If the NL passed out retroactive player of the month awards, Hickman would have garnered it for Aug. 1969 with his 10 homers, 25 RBIs and .315 average, joining the likes of Keith Moreland (NL Player of the Month for Aug. 1984) in the Cubs Clutch Hitters’ Hall of Fame. Not bad for a man who came into the month batting .216.

“I’ve been asked that before,” Hickman said of the question of how a part-time 32-year-old outfielder instantly became the Cubs’ money man at the zenith of the most beloved — and ultimately equaled by 2003 for the most frustrating — season in Cubs fans’ collective memories.

“I just honestly can’t put my finger on any one thing that changed. I got a little bit more confidence,” Hickman said. “I knew when I was going to play. Playing every day was part of it, maybe a big part. You hate to say you felt you were going to succeed. I did, got a little confidence. It just kind of snowballed, I guess.”

It sure did. Hickman was part of a revolving system of outfielders that Cubs general manager John Holland never really solved until he traded for Jose Cardenal and Rick Monday during the 1971 winter meetings. Salvaged from the scrap heap in the Dodgers farm system after five seasons playing on prodigious losing Mets teams, Hickman would start in right field against lefties and come in for late-inning defense as a Cub in 1968 and the first half of 1969. He collected several dramatic walk-off homers at Wrigley Field in June 1969, but these clouts weren’t even good enough to immediately snare a regular’s job. That was no way to get one’s rhythm as a hitter going.

A big Durocher fan

Suddenly, manager Leo Durocher had a hunch. He started Hickman against back-to-back right-handers at the beginning of August. The rest was history. Hickman went on to have the memorable August that clinched an even greater role for 1970 – cleanup hitter sandwiched between two much-better-known Cubs, Billy Williams and Ron Santo. All had at least 114 RBIs in a massive power display that was sabotaged by other team inadequacies as the ’70 Cubs fell five games short of the NL East title.

Santo and a host of teammates had their conflicts with the amoral, autocratic Durocher, out of his time as an effective manager by 1969. But Hickman is a loyal to the end to a man who helped him.

“I have to give Leo credit for my career, so to speak,” said Gentleman Jim. “He got to the point where he had confidence in me. Leo saved me. I was just a part-time player.
He gave me the chance to play. I started the (1968) season in the (Pacific) Coast League. At that time, I thought I was just about through. Then I got over there with the Cubs farm team (Tacoma), got hot, got a few hits, next thing I know I got called back to the big leagues.

“Leo just took care of me. He gave me a real good chance to play. After I had a little success, I felt he had a little confidence in me, and that helped me.”

Durocher had his favorites. Hickman quickly broke into that group with his clutch homers. The Lip went to bat for this protected bunch, as Hickman recalled of his reward for a dream season of 32 homers, 115 RBIs, a .315 average and Cubs-leading .419 on-base percentage and 93 walks in 1970.

“I got a $5,000 raise (after the ’70 season),” he said. “I had to go to Leo. I told him I’m not satisfied during the first road trip of the year, when we were in San Francisco. When we got back to Chicago, John Holland called me back into the office. Naturally, Leo had talked to him. I got another $5,000.”

For what Hickman had accomplished, for the friends he had made among his teammates and Cubs front-office staff due to his clutch play and gentlemanly persona, the team still had a bargain for the extra $10,000. For Hickman and wife Nita, the money sure came in handy for a growing family of four boys their parents ferried about Chicago in a station wagon, and for the family farm back in 970-person Henning, a modest drive northeast of Memphis.

Like Hickman for his fellow Cubs in 1969-70, his family has picked up their Big Jim the past two years. Nita passed away in Oct. 2012, and Hickman is living alone in his long-time house. However, second son Bill Hickman and wife Paula reside next door. “Big Jim’s here every night for supper,” Paula Hickman said. Youngest son Mike Hickman is five minutes away. There are grandchildren and great-grandchildren on whom to dote.

Nita and Jim Hickman (left photo). Nita passed away in 2012. In right photo, the Hickman boys on the golf course, one of their favorite destinations with their father. From left, Jim Jr., Mike, grandson Brian, Bill and Joey. Photos credit Paula Hickman.
Players did not complain much about aches and pains if they could get out on the field in 1969-70. Gentleman Jim hasn’t changed much as a senior citizen.

“So-so – I’m having a few problems,” he said when asked about his health. But that’s all you’ll get out of him. He occasionally uses a cane to alleviate his back problems. But other times, he’ll tell his sons he’s game for golf, and they’ll hit the links. He’ll also go out on his former farm to consult with the workers, based on his experience.

Paula Hickman helps maintain her father-in-law’s baseball memorabilia, which includes his No. 28 Cubs home pinstriped jersey, a game-used bat, a glove, a catcher’s mask and an autographed ball. He has attended a few card shows and old-timers games over the years. Despite his starring role in a peak period of team history, he has only been back to one Cubs Convention and never has been invited to sing during the ceremonial seventh-inning stretch.

"It is amazing that Jim Hickman-- one of the most beloved '69 Cubs of all time, the guy who carried the team in August '69 and almost got them over the finish line if he had played as a regular more—is not brought back as a regular Cubs Convention and Cubs events on a regular basis,” said Dr. David Fletcher, president of the Chicago Baseball Museum.

Hickman can’t get far away from baseball if he wanted. When he’d appear at a card show, he’d get asked about a specific game, and with a knowing laugh recalled not being able to satisfy the questioner about details. A game on TV at Bill Hickman’s house inevitably sparks discussion. He’ll forever be a part of the Cubs teams that are held so close to Baby Boomers’ hearts, his dramatic and often Waveland Avenue-length homers sparking vocal cord-busting calls by Brickhouse and Lloyd that still get replayed in fans’ memories.

**A heartwarming baseball success story**

In the end, Gentleman Jim is the All-American baseball success story. He was a strong young man signed by the Cardinals in 1956 who simply stuck it out through a lot of failure to reap the rewards of a late-career opportunity.

Hickman was never the loser the Mets’ eccentric birth might have branded him. Arriving at the Polo Grounds via the expansion draft in 1962, Hickman showed potential, and little else, as a semi-regular Mets outfielder in the franchise’s first four seasons. He slugged 56 homers during that time, including a game-winner against the Cubs in 1963 that sneaked into the Polo Grounds’ upper-deck overhang down the left-field line while Billy Williams camped under the ball, believing he’d catch it. Through all the hijinks and colorful characters like Casey Stengel, Marvelous Marv Throneberry and Choo-Choo Coleman on the record 120-loss ’62 Mets, Hickman’s name was rarely mentioned. He was too low-key to be swept up in the merriment of losing. In those first four seasons, he never played on a team that lost fewer than 109 games.

Hickman’s playing time and numbers further decreased in 1966, and he was sent packing 3,000 miles to the Dodgers. His career was at low ebb when Holland pulled off one of his top five trades among an otherwise lackluster track record. Lacking a closer, Hol-
land snared Phil “The Vulture” Regan” and throw-in Hickman two weeks into the 1968 season for outfielder Ted Savage -- more or less the right-field regular in 1967 -- and lefty Jim Ellis. To this day, Regan, also 77, is the Cubs teammate with whom Hickman keeps most in touch as pitching coach of the St. Lucie Mets of the Class A Florida State League.

Called up to the Cubs, Hickman got into 75 games with 213 plate appearance playing all three outfield positions in 1968. He still hit just .223 with five homers. His situation remained unchanged in 1969. He started out in a lefty-righty platoon in right with journeyman Al Spangler. By late spring, Durocher shifted Williams to right and inserted Opening Day home-run hero Willie Smith, a mediocre outfielder, in left. The lefty-hitting Smith had parlayed his walk-off homer, the most famous in Cubs Opening Day history, into playing time. Hickman would still start in right against southpaws and when Smith played, go in to right in the late innings for defense as Williams shifted back to left. The arrangement worked as the team zoomed to 20 above .500 at 36-16 in early June as “Cubs Power” frenzy began sweeping Chicago.

Hickman, who did not hit his first homer of ’69 until June 1, did not shirk from pressure when given the chance, though.

On Sunday, June 22, the Cubs trailed the Montreal Expos 6-3 going into the bottom of the ninth in the first game of a rain-soaked doubleheader at Wrigley Field. A rally began and Ernie Banks cut the lead to one with a two-out, two-run single. After entering late in place of Smith, Hickman, the next batter, powered a two-run homer for the win as fans leaped onto the field from the bleachers in celebration. Four days later, on Thursday, June 26, amid a 95-degree heat wave, “Hickman did it again!”, yelled Brickhouse. After Ken Rudolph walked with two out in the ninth against Pittsburgh Pirates reliever Bruce Dal Canton in a 5-5 tie. Hickman powered the ball onto Waveland for yet another win as the first-place Cubs swept the four-game series. Watch the Jim Hickman walkoff homers in “Cubs Fever” on the Jack Brickhouse micro-site. >>

But for the next-month-plus, Hickman remained stuck in his backup role as Williams played right and Smith left against right-handers. However, Smith’s average began slumping from the .300 level of late spring to .250 as July concluded.

**Gets his chance, produces immediately**

Again coming in late for Smith on Aug. 2 at Wrigley Field, Hickman got a two-run pinch single off Padres reliever (and 1968 Cub) Frank Reberger in a victory. The next day, he drew the start in right field against right-hander Joe Niekro, another ’68 team-

While a number of his teammates had conflicts with manager Leo Durocher, Jim Hickman credits The Lip with both reviving his career and helping double the raise in his new contract for 1971.
mate. When the Cubs moved on to Houston on Aug. 4, Durocher started him again against right-hander Tom Griffin. Hickman got two hits. The Lip’s hunch proved right this time.

The Cubs went on to craft a rare Astrodome three-game sweep. Hickman got two doubles off lefty Denny Lemaster in the second game, then slugged his first August homer off Jack Billingham in the rubber game Aug. 6. His production was well-timed, helping push the Cubs to 30 over .500 for the first time in .69 after the Astros sweep. Meanwhile, Hickman’s bat made up for fading production from the 38-year-old Banks, whose age and bad knees slowed him in the dog days after ranking one-two in RBIs with Santo in the NL during the first half.

On Aug. 9, Hickman belted two homers in a 4-0 victory in a Dodger Stadium night game – no easy task for any slugger. By now, Durocher was locked into Hickman, who moved to center in one game so Smith could make another start in left. The Cubs got to 31 over .500 at 74-43 on Aug. 13, boosting their lead over the upstart New York Mets to 10 games.

Opportunity apparently met maturity for a 6-foot-4, 200-pound hitter who might have been the strongest man in the Cubs lineup.

“I became a better breaking-ball hitter,” Hickman said. “I don’t know if I became a good breaking-ball hitter. It just worked out that way.”

With Gentleman Jim collecting clutch singles and doubles in the gap, he was no one-note brute slugger.

“It’s what I tried to do, hit the ball hard,” he said. “I don’t think it was an upper-cut swing.”

Fellow Cubs knew they had gotten a good two-way ballplayer going to plug the long-time outfield hole.

“Hick’ was a good player,” said Williams. “When he came over here, he had some tremendous years. He had about a ‘7’ or ‘8’ arm. He ran real good for a big guy. He was one of those unique guys, a right-handed hitter, a good fastball, low-ball hitter. He didn’t hit too many balls to right field, but hit balls hard to center field. He didn’t hardly miss the fastball.”

When the Cubs came home from their West Coast road trip Aug. 19, they enjoyed the post-season-style hoopla of Ken Holtzman’s no-hitter against the Braves that included Williams’ catch in the vines of a Henry Aaron homer that blew back into the ballpark. But the next three games at home against the Braves and Astros were disasters, prompting the Chicago Tribune’s Dozer to ask Durocher if the team was tired. Daring Dozer to ask the entire team, Durocher herded him and the other writers into the cramped clubhouse down the left-field line. No Cub responded to the “tired” question, although Williams apparently took Dozer aside later to say he was on track.

The Cubs needed a jolt. Hickman, of course, was the man who provided it. On Aug. 24, he slugged two homers against the Astros, including a ballpark-shaking come-from-
behind grand slam in the seventh that got Lloyd slightly excited on WGN Radio in an 11-5 victory. Then, in the first game of a doubleheader Aug. 25 before more than 40,000, Hickman homered again off Billingham in a 10-9 victory.

Without Hickman, trouble would have come sooner. The Cubs finished 4-7 on their home stand. Four straight victories with more displays of Hickman power through Sept. 2 boosted the team record to 84-52. Of all post-World War II teams, only the 97-victory Cubs of 2008 were further above .500 (as much as 35 over as early as Aug. 29, 2008) than the ’69 Cubs at any point of the season.

Perhaps he staved off the inevitable as Durocher kept running the same lineup out every day for the Wrigley Field matinee games, ignoring versatile infielder Paul Popovich and his .300 season to give Santo, shortstop Don Kessinger and second baseman Glenn Beckert some occasional rests while enjoying the big lead. Meanwhile, Durocher also compressed his pitching staff to basically three starters and overworked closer Regan, seemingly not trusting fourth starter Dick Selma and experienced relievers Ted Abernathy and Hank Aguirre.

Meanwhile, Mets manager Gil Hodges was ahead of his time with five starters and two dependable relievers in Ron Taylor and Tug McGraw. Starting with their 10-game deficit Aug. 13, the Mets ripped off a 20-6 run to make up 9 ½ games by the time they beat the Cubs two games in a row at Shea Stadium Sept. 8-9.

The Mets kept on going, eventually winning the NL East by eight games and totaling a shocking 100 victories. Meanwhile, the Cubs won just eight more games after Sept. 2. Recriminations have lasted nearly a half century, and won’t ever die out.

Williams said the edge over the Mets had been lost five years earlier when the Cubs traded Lou Brock, and thus they lacked a speedy leadoff man to energize the lineup.

**Gives the Miracle Mets full credit**

“I don’t disagree with that,” Hickman said of the missing fleet man at the top of the lineup.

“But I’ll tell you where we lost the pennant. The Mets played so good. That last 30 or 40 games, they didn’t lose but a handful.


“I don’t know that it was the day games or what it was. It happened.”

Hickman’s arm and catcher Randy Hundley’s swipe-tag ability almost slowed down the Mets in the New Yorkers’ 3-2 victory in the infamous “black cat game” – a black feline trotted into the on-deck circle while Santo waited to bat – on Sept. 8. In a 2-2 contest in the bottom of the sixth, Tommie Agee led off with a double off Bill Hands. Wayne Garrett then rifled a single to right. Hickman quickly scooped up the ball and fired
plate-ward as ex-Sox Agee steamed home. The ball and Agee arrived simultaneously just up the line from the plate. Hundley pirouetted and appeared to tag Agee as he went by. Home-plate ump Satch Davidson disagreed. The Mets’ third run stood up for the victory.

Although the analog color replay from a first-base camera appeared to show Agee was out, the play was simply 45 years too soon for definitive replay judgment. And like other famed climactic junctures in baseball, the debate will continue.

“From right field, it was kind of hard to tell. But I thought we had a good chance to get him,” said Hickman, bringing forth another quiet laugh when reminded it was two generations too soon for official replays. “I’ve seen the replay. I’m prejudiced...It looks like we had him.”

“Satch Davidson blew the call and Randy Hundley disproved the theory that white men can’t jump when he blew up after the blown call,” said Fletcher. “That 3-2 loss due to the blown call in the sixth inning forever changed Cubs history.

“Sadly, Triple-A star and September call-up Roe Skidmore of Decatur sat on the bench at Shea Stadium. Leo did not spell Ernie, who had run of gas in the late season (hitting only .208 in September).”

The Mets’ surge was so spectacular that it’s doubtful the Cubs themselves would have been able to stem the tide even if they had played better. Chicago had just four head-to-head games with the Mets in the final month, the final two coming as the season-ending series at Wrigley Field.
The season denouement actually provoked a Bowie Kuhn commissioner’s office investigation into Durocher’s handling of the Cubs. No doubt The Lip’s past shady associations and rumors of large gambling debts owed spurred on not only Kuhn’s people, but others from newspapers and government bodies. Kuhn actually asked Chicago Today columnist Rick Talley to sit on the news of the investigation for the good of baseball. But nothing Black Sox-like was ever proved against The Lip. He went about his business trying to atone for his mismanagement of the roster down the stretch. At one point Durocher said if he knew his team was tired, he’d have played nine pitchers.

After his 21-homer emergence, Hickman’s role for 1970 was assured, but not in the specific way he thought. Top outfield prospect Oscar Gamble, just 19 and a year out of high school in Montgomery, Ala., had been promoted from Double-A in late August and thrown right into center field between Williams and Hickman on a contending ballclub.

**Sorry Gamble trade sacrifices speed in outfield**

The teen-ager figuratively fell into a cookie jar. He happily partook of the easy availability of social life available to big leaguers both in Chicago and on road trips. After the season, the top brass heard Gamble had been socializing with white girls down in the Arizona instructional league. In GM Holland’s conservative world shaped by involvement with Jim Crow-era minor-league baseball in Oklahoma City, such behavior was a capital offense. Even more important, Holland patron/Cubs owner P.K. Wrigley was never to be embarrassed by such news leaking out. Although Holland had highly touted Gamble as the team’s best prospect on Opening Day while Durocher called him “another Willie Mays,” he had to go.

Holland and Durocher hurriedly shipped off Gamble and Selma to the Phillies for veteran right fielder Johnny Callison, an original 1950s Sox. Callison, whose best seasons were five years in the past, wasn’t really needed with Hickman’s emergence in right. The Cubs needed stability in center. Instead, they got rid of their best young center fielder, and a left-handed hitter to boot. Believing they could sacrifice outfield defense for hitting in the Friendly Confines – a longtime off-kilter strategy under Holland – Hickman would open the 1970 season in center despite the stark fact the Cubs needed more speed and a better ability to manufacture runs.

“I remember one year they had a survey that said the wind blew in (at Wrigley Field) two-thirds of the time,” Hickman recalled.

Even with the extra burden of center-field duty, Hickman picked up where he left off in 1970. As the Cubs repeated their fast getaway of ’69 with an 11-game winning streak and 13-4 start, Hickman began amassing his impressive record of 13-game-winning hits for the season. Most spectacular was his second walk-off shot in as many years against the Pirates at Wrigley Field. On May 28, he hit a two-run homer off Dave Giusti in the seventh. In his next time at-bat, with one out and Williams on first in the bottom of the ninth, Hickman connected against Gene Garber for the 7-6 victory. Such heroics netted him cover-story status, complete with his powerful swing portrayed in color on the cover, in *Chicago Today’s* Sunday magazine soon afterward.
By now, Hickman frequently hit cleanup right behind Williams due to Santo’s early-season slump. The combo fed off each other as both hitters recorded their best seasons. Hickman protected Williams, but Williams set up Hickman both at the plate and on the basepaths.

“I helped him,” Williams said. “I worked the count good. The pitcher used so much energy trying to get me out. I got him RBIs. When you got a caliber hitter like myself, it helps the guy behind me.”

Said Hickman: “To have somebody on base every time you walked up there made a big difference.”

**Rare triple 100-RBI grouping**

Although Williams cleaned off plenty of runners in front of Hickman with his 42 hom-ers and 129 RBIs, he got on base more than enough times via a career-high 205 hits to provide Gentleman Jim his RBI chances to complement the work of one-two hitters Kessinger and Beckert. And when Santo finally broke out of his doldrums with a 10-RBI spree in a July 6 doubleheader against the Expos at Wrigley Field, the Cubs truly had a middle of the order for the ages. Santo finished with 26 homers and 114 RBIs. The 1970 Cubs were only the second team in franchise history since the heyday of Hack Wilson, Rogers Hornsby, Gabby Hartnett and Riggs Stephenson in 1929-30 to have three players with more than 100 RBIs in the lineup.

**Cubs 3-4-5 siege guns of 1970**

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<th>Runs</th>
<th>Hits</th>
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“His 1970 season was one of the greatest years of any Cub player,” Fletcher said. "'Gentlemen Jim' is forever linked to the one of the most iconic plays in MLB All-Star history when his 12th- inning base single up the middle drove in Pete Rose -- who was signaled home by Cubs manager Leo Durocher serving as third base coach -- and barreled over Ray Fosse at the plate.”

Banks’ knees finally gave in to the ravages of age at 39. Mr. Cub headed to the long-term disabled list and fill-in work as Brickhouse’s TV analyst in the summer of 1970. As a result, Hickman shifted to first base. He stayed there most of the rest of the season when Joe Pepitone, the most un-Hickman-like personality one could concoct, arrived via a late-July waiver trade. “Pepi” wowed the fans with his quips, mod hairstyle and night-crawling rounds to go with his 12 homers over two-plus months.
Yet even with all that firepower and four solid starters with the waiver-wire arrival of Milt Pappas in late June, the Cubs could not get a full head of steam going. Their Pythagorean won-lost record, a theorem concocted by stats monger Bill James to relate expected team performance to run differential, was later computed as 94-68, contrasting to their actual 84-78 final mark. The 1970 Cubs outscored their opponents 806-679. But that team is the textbook example that modern-day metrics are not a totally accurate barometer of a franchise’s ultimate performance.

The Williams-Hickman-Santo Cubs could pound opponents into submission. But the lack of speed and “little man’s game,” along with the aging Durocher’s conservatism, were negative factors in winning close games. The ’70 Cubs were just 17-21 in one-run games and 4-6 in extra inning contests contrasted to 30-17 in blowout games (winning by five or more runs). Worse yet, their bullpen imploded finally with Durocher’s two-year overuse of Regan at the expense of the rest of the reliever. Regan pitched to contact with his sinker, mixing in an infamous Vaseline ball. At one point in mid-season 1970, Regan was 4-1 with 10 saves. He finished 5-9 with 12 saves and hefty 4.76 ERA.

“Though my heart was broken in 1969,” said Fletcher, “we should have won the NL East in 1970 when Santo, Williams, and Hickman were like the ’29 Cubs Murderer’s Row, each clubbing more than 100 RBIs and we lost out to the Pirates by five games.”

Despite yet another disappointment that should have led Holland to immediately start freshening up the Cubs roster, Hickman could be proud. Few Cubs have matched his numbers since. In addition to the 32 homers and 115 RBIs, he had 102 runs scored with 162 hits.

Hickman slugged 36 homers the next two seasons as nagging injuries and some lineup instability cut his at-bats under 400 each season. Then his 36 years finally caught up with him in 1973.

Tired of Pepitone’s act and with supposed power prospect Pat Bourque ready for first base, Holland dumped “Pepi” onto the Braves for first-base hopeful Andre Thornton on May 13, 1973. But the lefty-swinging Bourque, a Holy Cross product, was exposed after one trip around the league, opening up a gaping hole at first on an offensively-challenged team. Neither Hickman nor trumpet-playing Carmen Fanzone was up to the task. Hickman slugged just three homers and batted .244 in 1973. Thornton was called up later in the summer. But he wasn’t quite ready for his 30-homer, 100-RBI-level career that would take place after the Cubs foolishly traded him in 1976 – grist for another story too long to insert here.

Hickman finally departed in the second wave of Holland’s post-1973 housecleaning in spring training 1974. A trade to the Cardinals for pitcher Scipio Spinks, who never played for the Cubs, netted him another half-season of big-league time before he was finally released.

**Gentleman Jim comes through one more time**

Continued work on the family farm the Hickmans eventually lost due to financial troubles, a stint as a minor-league Cincinnati hitting coach and patriarch status in the fami-
ly has filled the decades ever since. Proudly, Hickman came through in the clutch one more time.

Charlotte’s Leigh-Ann Young, daughter of Cubs coach Verlon “Rube” Walker, a Hickman uniformed colleague from 1968 to 1970, has been on her own special journey to find a recording of her father’s voice. Walker tragically died at 43 from chronic myeloid leukemia in 1971 when his daughter was just 3. Failing to find an old “Leadoff Man”-type radio or TV interview of Walker, Young has been contacting 1960s-vintage Cubs with the assistance of the Chicago Baseball Museum. The former players and coaches like Joey Amalfitano have painted a vivid portrait of her father’s personality and daily life. Many of Young encounters are recalled in her blog www.baseballlovestory.com.

One of the highlights of her journey was her recent phone conversation with Hickman, who was a good ol’ boy just like Walker.

“Rube was really a nice guy,” Gentleman Jim said. “He was one of those people who never seemed like he had a bad day. He always had something cheerful to say. A lot of times it was funny...a lot of it can’t be repeated. But he was a nice man. He worked hard. He did his job.”

Hickman came well-recommended by his old teammates, and Young wasn’t disappointed when she finally connected.

“On my ‘quest’ to find a recording of my father's voice, I began reaching out to players who knew him,” she said. “One name kept coming up over and over again: Gentleman Jim Hickman. Each player I spoke with urged me to contact Jim saying that he knew my dad well and that they had similar temperaments.

“I'll never forget the day he returned my call. I fell in love with him. Listening to him describe my dad as 'one of the nicest guys he ever met' took my breath away, He said my dad was a 'hard worker, loved by all the players, kept everyone laughing, and a class act.’ His memories recounted in a soft Southern drawl brought me comfort. I am grateful for his kind words, but most of all for his voice and turn of phrase. There was an ease to it, I could have talked to him all day.”
Truthfully, anyone else who remembers a man who came out of practically nowhere to carry a team ‘til it gave out would want to talk about great Cubs times with Jim Hickman. But he’s been blessed with relatively long life. We want him to carry on, so we won’t wear him out. After all, we should practice what we preach. Since we wanted Du-rocher to rest his regulars, we’ll give Gentleman Jim his leave with one parting statement about one of the most memorable eras ever in Wrigley Field:

“Everybody, if they had to do it over again, they’d do it a little different,” he said.

“Now, it was some good days.”