Deserving of Ford Frick Award,
Vince Lloyd an enduring voice of summer

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(First in a series of articles running throughout 2014 on the great personalities and events that marked Wrigley Field’s 100 years of operation.)

Getting recognized for long and meritorious service at Wrigley Field sometimes takes awhile. The worthy recipient might as well take the late Chicago Tribune sports columnist David Condon’s advice: “In this business, you learn to be a good sitter.”

Ernie Banks waited nearly a decade after Harry Caray’s statue was dedicated in 1999 to have his own monument, and none other than Henry Aaron, at the ceremony, proclaimed the honor was a decade overdue. Fergie Jenkins had to wait until Greg Maddux’s career ended to see the Cubs uniform No. 31 they both wore retired. Achievers of a half century ago, such as 22-game winner Dick Ellsworth and 96-RBI producer George Altman, haven’t even been invited back to the Cubs Convention.

And, sadly, Ron Santo only garnered Hall of Fame status posthumously, the Veterans Committee voters almost shamed to voting him in a year after diabetes complications finally nailed the beloved “This Old Cub.”

The latter route unfortunately will need to be traveled again for the great Vince Lloyd to be considered for the Ford C. Frick Award.

More than 10 years after the enduring baseball announcer passed away from cancer at 86, Lloyd has another chance to be a finalist for the Frick Award, given to a top baseball announcer with enshrinement in a wing associated with the Hall of Fame in Cooperstown. This year, the fans who enjoyed the baritone calls of Lloyd in tandem from 1965...
Vince Lloyd broke in to Chicago baseball TV coverage doing the Leadoff Man on WGN-TV in this TV Forecast listing in 1951 (left). Both WGN-TV (Ch. 9) and WBKB-TV (Ch. 4), which became WBBM-TV in 1953, televised the games with separate crews and announcers. In this 1959 TV Guide listing (right), Lloyd had an 11:55 a.m. newscast at the WGN studios, then had to dash to Wrigley to do the Leadoff Man.

to 1986 with the sometimes garbled syntax of analyst partner Lou Boudreau on Cubs radio broadcasts, can take matters in their own hands.

The Hall of Fame recently decided to more carefully focus on broadcasters in distinct eras. The next round -- for Frick honors at Cooperstown in Aug. 2015 -- will focus on the “Living Room” era, reflecting the rise of TV. Announcers working from the 1950’s through the 1980s qualify.

That’s Lloyd’s time. After an apprenticeship in his native South Dakota and Peoria, he joined WGN in Sept. 1949. Lloyd became a part of the Cubs and White Sox TV presentation in 1951. Five years later, he teamed as video partner with Jack Brickhouse, succeeding the besotted Harry Creighton in 1956. That was good training for his 1965 pairing with “Good Kid” Boudreau. He signed off as a WGN regular in 1986, only to be recalled for 10 games, at age 77 in 1994, to fill in for an ailing Caray.

Fans will have a chance to nominate “Living Room” candidates through the Hall of Fame’s own site and via Facebook. The only requirement is 10 consecutive years of service in a big-league broadcast booth. Lloyd more than tripled that qualification.

The Chicago Baseball Museum heartily endorses Lloyd’s candidacy. You don’t have to go to a polling place. If you were entertained by the Lloyd-Boudreau folksy presenta-
tion all those years, Lloyd bellowing “Holy Mackeral” for a Cubs homer while Boudreau then agreed with a “No Doubt About It,” then you merely have to perform a few mouse clicks.

**Fans nominate 3 of the 10 finalists**

A total of 10 finalists will be selected for the Frick “Living Room” award. Seven will be selected by the Hall of Fame’s internal committee, said HOF spokesman Brad Horn. The other three – the top trio of vote-getters -- will be nominated by fans through the above-mentioned processes. Longer-form endorsements will be a factor.

“Letters of support do help,” said Horn of the internal committee’s deliberation for the first Lucky Seven of finalists.

The Hall divvied up the different eras to provide a “more like comparison of announcers,” he added. “Broadcasting in the early days is not anywhere near what it is today. It’s a more even playing field.”

Brickhouse (1983) and Caray (1989) already are Frick Award winners. South-suburban Harvey native Boudreau was elected to the Hall of Fame in 1970 based on his playing and boy-managing career, largely with the Cleveland Indians. Lloyd, who worked with Caray his final five years in the booth, is as Cooperstown-worthy.

The big problem was Lloyd was the Cubs radio announcer in an era when WGN expanded the team’s video schedule to 148 games or more, most extensive in the majors. In Chicago, the radio announcer always took a lower profile to the TV play-by-play man, first Brickhouse, then Caray, through the sheer number of televised games.

In the majority of other markets, the radio man was king. Just 300 miles down the road in St. Louis, Caray (in his first broadcast-booth incarnation) and Jack Buck were superstars on KMOX-Radio because Cardinals owner Gussie Busch strictly rationed telecasts to 40 per year, all on the road, to protect the Busch Stadium gate. Ditto in Los Angeles, where Vin Scully was practically the only conduit to the Dodgers, via 50,000-watt KFI-Radio, as Dodgers lord Walter O’Malley first limited telecasts in 1958 to the 11 road games (just nine in 1962 with the 162-game schedule) in San Francisco. These video-parsimonious policies did not change until the advent of cable-TV in the 1980s.
But Lloyd was a first-string, first-class, Frick-worthy announcer in his own right. Remember, you had to have access to a TV to listen to Brickhouse and Caray. There was no game streaming on computers. The majority of workplaces and schools forbade video sets. Cars predominately had AM-only radios. And beyond the signal reach of WGN-TV’s tower on the Prudential Building, the mass of Cubs fans in downstate Illinois, Iowa, Indiana and Michigan stood close by to their radios to hear the kind of broadcast most appealing to the Midwesterner.

Lloyd and Boudreau were at once folksy and honest. They were “homers” without hitting you over the head. Lloyd could go down to the guttural, vocal chord-busting level on a clutch Banks or Santo home run. When the Cubs were losing, the broadcast toned down. On-field foibles were not covered up.

Triumph has roots in tragedy
Lloyd actually was teamed with Boudreau due to tragedy. Play-by-play man Jack Quinlan, perhaps the best voice of all time in Chicago baseball annals (Lloyd and Brickhouse would tell you that), was killed when his convertible slammed into a semi-trailer truck rounding a curve during spring training in Arizona in 1965. WGN brass asked Lloyd to switch over from TV, with Blackhawks voice/10 p.m. news anchor Lloyd Pettit taking over as Brickhouse’s sidekick. Lloyd would only make the move if Boudreau, who was reluctant to continue sans Quinlan, stayed put. All worked out in the long run.

While dealing with the irascible Leo Durocher, who yanked Lloyd’s pipe out of his mouth during a team flight, the duo had fun in the booth that hung from the Wrigley Field upper deck just on the third-base side.

Appreciative fans from all over the Midwest sent food to the pair. You couldn’t do this today – Lloyd on several occasions ate while announcing. That made him all the more real. Also dealing in live radio, a number of WGN advertisers wanted their commercials read by the announcers between innings, to get the ambience of ballpark sounds in the background. Asked years later when he could make a dash for the bathroom down the ramp at the end of the pressbox, given these extra duties, Lloyd replied, “We just sweated it out.”

Lloyd performed his play-by-play duties as only part of his WGN schedule at a time when Brickhouse said an “80-hour week was like a vacation” to the baseball announcing crew.

At one point, he was mandated to be hyper-popular morning man Wally Phillips’ sports voice, requiring a 5:30 a.m. arrival at WGN. Fortunately, the Cubs played only day games at Wrigley Field, so Lloyd at least could go home after the game to get to bed at a reasonable time. In the 1970s, alternating with Brickhouse and Boudreau, Lloyd would have to come back to the station to anchor the sportscast on the 10 p.m. news, bedecked in a canary-yellow blazer with a Channel 9 logo that weather guru Tom Skilling said was so cheaply-made it could hardly be dry-cleaned.

While working TV with Brickhouse in the 1950s, Lloyd anchored an 11:55 a.m. TV newscast at the station’s studios next to Tribune Tower. He’d then have to dash to
Wrigley Field to prep for both the game telecast and his on-field “Leadoff Man” interview. Lloyd got a break one year when the Cubs began home games at 1:55 p.m.

Lloyd had two of his memorable moments either on the field or in the box seats.

**Grace under pressure with Cardwell, JFK**

Amid a maelstrom of celebrating fans held back by assistant director Arne Harris and Andy Frain ushers, he somehow conducted an interview with Don Cardwell near the Cubs dugout moments after Cardwell no-hit the Cardinals on May 15, 1960. He had run down to the field moments after doing a live commercial in the booth for Oklahoma gasoline. After Cardwell was sprung from the interview to retreat to the safety of the clubhouse down the left-field line, Lloyd noticed he had plenty of slack for his mic cord. The merry mob had snapped the cord just after Cardwell finished.

Eleven months later, working the Sox’s season opener at Griffith Stadium in Washington, D.C., Lloyd found himself face to face with President John F. Kennedy in the box seats. Lloyd conducted a semi-uncomfortable, short “Leadoff Man” interview with the otherwise telegenic JFK. Even though the session was set up through labor connections with WGN, the Secret Service apparently wasn’t too happy with the chat. Still, WGN and Lloyd could claim a presidential guest on the long-running pre-game show.

Lloyd, along with Boudreau, also was a man for all (sports) seasons. The pair broadcast a weekly Big Ten football Game of the Week once baseball was over. They were the Bulls first radio team in 1966, handling home games only. Lloyd’s additional WGN-TV assignments took him to Chicago Fire games in the World Football League in 1974, high school championship swimming coverage and play-by-play of the Saturday morning LaGrange Pet Parade.

All along the way, Lloyd won friends, influenced people, picked up the tab for dinner guests and tipped. You know the guilty parties in his circle who were alleged not to have done the latter two acts at restaurants.

**Get out the vote!**

The Cubs, and baseball in general, often have a better-late-than-never action on deserved honors. So it’s up to Lloyd’s old constituency. They should outnumber most other teams’ fan bases.

Al Yellon, editor of the popular BleedCubbieBlue.com blog, will endorse his readers – some of whom are shell-shocked over the Cubs surfeit of failures and collapses over the decades – to back Lloyd with their clicks.

“I am all in favor of getting Vince his due; I have written about this before,” said Yellon, a Cubs fan since 1963 who listened to Lloyd start to finish in his pairing with Boudreau.
Preparing for disappointment, but still hopeful, is Rich Williams, Lloyd’s grand-nephew. He tried to get a groundswell of on-line votes for Lloyd when the Hall first tried such a nominating process after his uncle’s death.

“I guess I’m beginning to understand what our parents and grandparents went through as we were growing up,” Williams said. “The transition of technology and the faster pace of life does not understand or stand still for the memories and visualization of the game of baseball through radio broadcasts.

“With more and more former athletes entering the booth, the professional broadcaster has been a lost profession. People don’t want to listen to people who have not played the game, they want past experiences or direct relationships to when they were ball-players.”

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Ron Santo (left) and Ernie Banks flank Vince Lloyd at Wrigley Field. Lloyd covered both Hall of Famers’ entire Cubs careers.

“There was no more loyalty or appreciation for the professionals in doing not only baseball, but multiple sports,” he said. “Jack, Vince, Lou and many others who were responsible for building WGN are forgotten with no appreciation of their sacrifices. The fact they have to make three categories for the admission into the HOF for broadcasters shows how little people remember the lost art of ‘color’ broadcasting through the voices of yesterday.

“I hope and pray that Vince gets his overdue recognition for his great work, but my hope and dedication is fading into the sunset that is before me as it was for Vince. My greatest gratitude of my uncle was when I watched Cal Ripken, Jr. break the record of Lou Gehrig in memorable fashion, I called my uncle during the game and thanked him for introducing me to the game we love to call ‘Baseball.’ I just hope baseball fans can show their gratitude in return for my uncle into a place he belongs, the baseball Hall of Fame.”

This time, the Hall is practicing a semi-democracy. Not one member of the Baseball Writers Association of America, which is exclusionary in its Hall of Fame voting, is involved in the process. Do it the Chicago way, Vince Lloyd fans, by voting often to get the right man in there.