100th birthday party rare for anything, but lucky for Wrigley Field

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I have not attended too many 100th birthday parties.

I wasn’t there when Wrigley Field was first eligible for an AARP card in 1964. Barely missed that half-century celebratory mark by three years, when I recorded my first of at least 500 games at Wrigley Field. That number fortunately included a few Bears games for which I thank my father eternally to have seen Dick Butkus create mayhem at Clark and Addison.

April 23 was quite a special day for Major League Baseball and Chicago. There was a noticeable “playoff atmosphere” buzz in the air. You walk up to the park and instantly see that Ron Santo and Billy Williams statues are decked in ChiFeds jerseys. This was a great touch and made the day very special.

So did the Wrigley Field workers wearing birthday hats. The grounds crew sported Weegham Park jackets honoring the original name of the park that served as the home of short-lived Chicago Federals. That team played in the freshly-built Weegham Park in 1914-1915 before the Federal League collapsed. Charles Weegham’s Feds folded into the Cubs, which he acquired in 1916 and then moved from West Side Grounds to his North Side ballpark.

It was impossible to get up and view the Wrigley Field replica birthday cake in front of the ballpark as fans clamored to catch a glimpse, get in the park in enough time to get a ChiFeds jersey and a Cubs birthday cupcake.

The ceremonies seemed like the second edition of Opening Day with the bunting and parade of dignities and Cubs legends.

Clarification on The Gipper at Wrigley
Gov. Pat Quinn issued a proclamation: “Since then it (Wrigley Field) has been home to numerous Hall of Fame inductees such as Ernie Banks, Ron Santo and Greg Maddux; and iconic announcers, such as Harry Caray and Jack Brickhouse – Ronald Reagan even served as a radio ann-
nouncer…” A clarification is needed here about Reagan’s Wrigley Field connections. The only time he actually broadcast in Wrigley Field was a couple of innings in Sept. 30, 1988, when the sitting president joined Harry Caray in the TV booth after surprising the Cubs by showing up at Clark and Addison. Reagan actually broadcast the Cubs in the mid-1930s from hundreds of miles away in the WHO-Radio studios on Des Moines, re-creating the games by Western Union ticker.

Weegham Park was changed to Cubs Park in 1919, and later Wrigley Field in 1926 in honor of William Wrigley, Jr., the Cubs’ majority stakeholder. At the time, Wrigley’s right-hand man, Cubs President William Louis Veeck, Sr., was busy transforming Wrigley Field into a well-attended, double-decked baseball venue.

Now, fans of the ballpark – which has long been showing its age -- are playing a waiting game as the Ricketts family navigates through the Chicago political minefields to start their projected $300 million renovation plan. Supportive of those efforts is Commissioner Bud Selig, in attendance at the birthday gala. Selig has an institutional-memory connection to Wrigley Field. He attended games as a youth in the 1940s, arriving via the old North Shore interurban train from Milwaukee that ran on the L tracks.

Keeping with star-crossed franchise tradition, the Cubs even managed to snatch a loss in the jaws of victory. Valparaiso, Ind. native Jeff Samardzija, toughest-luck starter in the majors, was the victim of Cubs bullpen. “The Shark” left a three-run lead to the ‘pen in the seventh. But the arson squad coughed it all up with five-run ninth to the Diamondbacks (er, Kanas City Packers for the celebration) for a 7-5 loss.

The 32,000 announced crowd had long thinned by the time the bullpen collapsed. They had already gotten their jerseys and cupcakes, seen the charming fly-over by the bi-planes before the start of the game and sang happy birthday to Wrigley Field after the fifth inning. One touch was the launching of hundreds of balloons from behind the left-field bleachers that promptly sailed into the stands thanks to the stiff north-east winds that knocked down a lot of baseballs.

Dressing the Ron Santo statue in the “ChiFeds” uniform set the tone for the special day.
Wrigley like going to Grandma’s house
For me, Wrigley is special because it is one of the few constants in my life. It is like going to my Grandma’s house in Lakewood, Ohio as a kid because it was familiar and warm. It seemed to always be there and I could count on it. But my Grandma died in 1992. The family sold the house. Even going past the place was not quite the same.

The Wrigley event reminded me of when I was fortunate to be a special guest of the Comiskey family when the White Sox threw a 100 year birthday party for Comiskey Park on July 1, 2010. That under-loved ballpark actually had “died” 20 years earlier when the originally-nicknamed Baseball Palace of the World was torn down to make way for Comiskey Park II, later re-named U.S. Cellular Field. Celebrating in a skybox with the Comiskeys and Sox icons such as Billy Pierce, Minnie Minoso and Ron Kittle was memorable. But it was not the same. Comiskey Park was gone. It was just a parking lot.

Not Wrigley Field. It is still there. I can still go to the seat from which I witnessed Ken Holtzman’s no-hitter on Aug. 19, 1969, highlighted by Billy Williams’ seventh-inning catch in the ivy of Hank Aaron’s blast that blew back in the ballpark. I can still go to the same seat where I witnessed Pete Rose break the all-time MLB hits record at Wrigley Field on Sept. 8, 1985. Charlie Hustle was in the lineup only because originally-scheduled Cubs starter Steve Trout fell off his bike. I can go to the same seat I saw the Cubs win Game 163, the wild-card tie-breaker, in 1998. I recall that Monday night sitting two seats down from soon-to-be-elected Gov. George Ryan (not sure if he paid for his ticket or not...).

Throughout the beautiful chilly spring day, I kept thinking how Wrigley Field is the one constant in my life. A place of joy as well as incredible sorrow that I count on being part of my life and all the wonderful memories.

Given all the inevitable changes in the course of daily life, it’s amazing the old girl had made it to her centennial. You wonder if Dodger Stadium, the next-oldest ballpark in the majors, will be around for its 100th birthday in 2062.
At the gala, I sat down two seats away from Aisle 4, Row 8, Seat 112 that is forever intertwined in the history of the ballpark. That seat was the trigger point of catastrophe when the Cubs were five outs from going to the World Series on Oct. 14, 2003. But fate intervened. Sadly, Steve Bartman did not make a surprise visit to steal the show for the Cubs on their 100th anniversary. The woman occupying the seat was aware, however, of the strange history on which she was sitting.

**Bring back near-forgotten players**

If there was one aspect absent from the birthday event, it was the lack of variety of the great names who made up the place’s history. In addition to the ongoing beef-up of player-development in their baseball operations department, the Cubs need to bolster their sense of historical acumen.

Sure, trot out the usual Hall of Famers, who appear at most big team events. But the Cubs need to mix it up. Bring back some familiar and historic old faces.

Offer an olive branch to Sammy Sosa, who appears to have a Pete Rose-type ban from everything Cubs. Give Mark Grace a chance to perform some community service when he puts some distance beyond his DUI conviction last year. “Gracie” reportedly turned down both an invite to the event and also an interview on WGN-TV’s Wrigley-at-100 special. Bring back the likes of 1960s achievers Dick Ellsworth and George Altman, who never have appeared at a Cubs Convention.

My major disappointment that Kerry Wood, the Mr. Cub of the new millennium, was not there. Woody lives a couple miles south of the ballpark. He’s not far from the minds of many Cubs fans. Both Woody and Greg Maddux reportedly declined to show due to family issues.

The Cubs also missed an opportunity to honor the two men who transformed Wrigley Field into what is it today: the father-son baseball executive duo of William L. Veeck, Sr. and more famous son Bill Veeck. Through projects in the 1920s and 1930s, the pair practically built the ballpark into the familiar structure that exists today.

All of the Cubs had to was call up Night Train Veeck, the great grandson of William L. Veeck, Sr. Night Train he could have hopped the Red Line from his job as a White Sox sales rep at U.S. Cellular Field to have represented his family in the ceremonies.

But enough of quibbling about aspects of the party.

Happy Birthday, Wrigley Field. I hope you can make it another 100 years.