

# “It Ain’t So, Kid, It Just Ain’t So:” History’s Apology to “Shoeless” Joe Jackson, Charles Comiskey and Chicago’s Black Sox

By Daniel J. Voelker and Paul A. Duffy

Eliot Asinof’s book, *Eight Men Out* (“8MO”), released in 1963, was a groundbreaking piece of work, once and for all painting a definitive picture of the scandal that rocked professional baseball in 1920, and abruptly ended the careers of the players who were involved. *8MO*’s release – and its widespread acceptance as the previously untold, true story of the Black Sox scandal of 1919 – were likely the proverbial last nails in the coffin of “Shoeless” Joe Jackson’s prospects of obtaining reinstatement in the league and, more importantly, posthumous admission into the Baseball Hall of Fame. Asinof’s files containing research and interviews that played an integral part in his creation of *8MO* have only now come to light, and they suggest that Asinof inaccurately accused “Shoeless” Joe and others of being involved in, or having caused, the World Series fix.

Three lesser-known, but clearly innocent, members of the same Black Sox team, catcher Ray Schalk, second baseman Eddie Collins and pitcher Urban “Red” Faber, were all inducted into the Hall of Fame. The 1919 White Sox are widely-regarded as one of the finest sports teams of all time. Newly-available material, Asinof’s notes of his writing of *8MO* and related materials, which have recently come to light following his death in June 2008, along with growing skepticism of Asinof’s thesis, suggest that his portrayal of events in *8MO* may not be entirely accurate and, indeed, was more than slightly fictional.

*8MO* details how in one fell swoop one of the winningest of all baseball clubs, the Chicago White Sox, became commonly known as the “Black Sox” and were squarely disgraced! At the time, the three questions on everyone’s mind were:

1) who was involved; 2) why would they do it and; 3) would professional baseball survive?

Asinof’s *8MO* portrays the eight White Sox players, who history now records as having “thrown” the 1919 World Series, as sympathetic characters who were driven to cheat – almost out of necessity – because of the greed of Charles Albert Comiskey, the wealthy White Sox owner and supposed skinflint. Notwithstanding the lack of a single footnote, Asinof alludes that only through painstaking research was he able to delve “into the scandal’s causes and morality,” and explode “its



myths and distortions” to arrive at the “real truth.” In doing so, Asinof claims to have spent over two years traveling “several thousand miles” and interviewing numerous individuals.

Asinof provides a partial memoir of the making of *8MO* in his 1979 release of *Bleeding Between The Lines* (“BBL”), an account of his trials and tribulations in defending a series of lawsuits concerning *8MO* and his rights to the book. *BBL* was of little success. Buried within its pages, however, Asinof admits to giving fictional names to at least two characters. According to Asinof, on the advice of counsel, and apparently seeing a movie deal in the future, “[t]wo fictitious characters were inserted [into *8MO*] that existed nowhere but from my typewriter, designed to prevent screenwriters from stealing the story and claiming their material was from the public domain.”

The fiction did not end with Asinof’s resort to fictional characters, as at least one dramatic event in *8MO* was also fabricated. In a private conversation held on August 31, 2003, with a noted baseball historian (Dr. David J. Fletcher of the fledgling Chicago Baseball Museum), Asinof clarified that “Harry F.,” the thug

featured in *8MO*, was a *completely* fictional character, not merely a pseudonym, and that the incident involving him never occurred. In *8MO*, “Harry F.” is the thug who was hired by the East Coast-based gambler-fixers to threaten White Sox star pitcher, Claude “Lefty” Williams, before the eighth game of the Series. As depicted in the book, “Harry F.” threatens Williams, who was supposedly getting cold feet about pitching to throw the Series to the Cincinnati Reds, with the death of his beloved wife. Over the years, other authors and film-makers, telling their own versions of the 1919 scandal, have unwittingly incorporated “Harry F.” into their plots. Asinof refused to disclose the name of the second fictional character in *8MO*, and his identity remains a mystery. There is little doubt that the events associated with this second character are also pure fiction and have likewise been incorporated into other retellings of the Black Sox scandal.

Baseball historians have begun to question the accuracy of *8MO*’s explanation of the reason the players were so willing to betray their loyal fans. For example, a recent study by Bob Hoie, a noted baseball historian, suggests that the 1919 Chicago White Sox were one of the highest paid teams in the league. Similarly, the story that Comiskey advertently negated a promise to pay Eddie Cicotte (his other star pitcher) a \$10,000 bonus if he won 30 games during the 1917 season, by benching him after his 27th win, has also been shown by historians to be likely false.

The same fate must come to the claims that to save a few “bits” for laundering costs, Comiskey made his ballplayers play in dirty, soiled uniforms, and that their \$3 *per diem* for meals (a steak cost 50¢ in 1919) was tantamount to cruel and unusual punishment. It is important to note that 1919 was expected by the club owners to be a difficult year (much like 1917 and 1918 had been) due to the fact that World War I had recently drawn to a close. Without a modern-day economic stimulus package to fall back on, the owners agreed to

pinch pennies. Asinof’s portrayal of Comiskey as a skinflint, at least in comparison to other professional club owners at that time, may not have been entirely accurate and, in any event, does not provide a realistic motive for the so-called “fix.”

In *8MO*, Asinof admits that when researching and writing the book he relied on newspaper accounts of the 1920 Grand Jury proceedings in Chicago, as opposed to the actual transcripts of those proceedings. Asinof’s

account of this saga also relies on the false premise that newspaper reports in 1920 were accurate. Yellow journalism, which downplays legitimate news and instead focuses on eye-catching headlines meant to sell papers, was quite common during this time period. Although Asinof characterizes the coverage of the

proceedings as “adequate,” the proceedings were secret and not open to the press or the public. Therefore, anything reported by the press about those proceedings would have necessarily been second- or third-hand and not very reliable.

In *8MO*, Asinof explains that he never read, or even had access to, the transcripts of the Grand Jury proceedings that led to the indictments against the “Chicago Eight,” including “Shoeless” Joe. Asinof, in *8MO*, goes on to explain that “[n]o one with whom I came in contact had ever seen the transcripts nor had they any idea where they might be found.” In *BBL*, however, Asinof freely admits that Judge Hugo Friend, who had presided over the 1921 criminal trial against the ballplayers, gave Asinof “the name of the clerk [in Milwaukee] who might help me find the records [of the 1920 Grand Jury proceedings].” It had also been widely reported that in the 1924 suit in Milwaukee<sup>1</sup>, the attorneys for Comiskey (employed by a law firm still in existence) had

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<sup>1</sup> Brought by “Shoeless” Joe against Comiskey, to recover two years of back-pay for the 1920 and 1921 seasons.

possession of the missing transcripts from the 1920 Grand Jury proceedings, which they had quoted at length. The 1924 trial, unlike the Grand Jury proceedings, was open to the press as well as the public. Asinof thus had ample access to accurate information on both trials, and yet he failed to incorporate these facts into his storytelling.

A superb storyteller and author of several novels, Asinof passed away on June 10, 2008, at the age of 88. The author's estate recently sold his notes and research of his writing of *8MO* to the Chicago History Museum for an undisclosed amount. These materials will only add to the questions about the historical accuracy of Asinof's *8MO*, the book's proper place in history and major league baseball's decision to ban "Shoeless" Joe from entry into the Baseball Hall of Fame. The lack of supporting information in Asinof's meticulously indexed notes suggest that the book may not be much more than fiction, or at the very most a summary of inflated press accounts. In fact, the bulk of Asinof's notes appear to be handwritten transcriptions of old newspaper accounts and conversations with both retired and current sportswriters who may have been influenced by rumor, innuendo or cloudy recollections.

In one document within the Museum's collection, Asinof's handwritten notes of his sources for *8MO* (dated March 9, 1977), Asinof claims that, among others, he "talked to" Harry Grabiner, the Chicago White Sox Secretary (General Manager), while researching and writing *8MO*. *8MO*, at one point, references the private thoughts of Grabiner as though Asinof had interviewed him while writing the book. Grabiner, however, died on October 24, 1948, over a decade before Asinof first began his research in 1960. The only other known first-hand account of such information, Grabiner's diary, was not discovered until after *8MO*'s publication. The diary was discovered buried in a

wall at Comiskey Park, and it was made public for the first time in 1965, when excerpts of it appeared in *The Hustlers Handbook* (after *8MO* was released). No record of any conversations between Asinof and Grabiner (or Comiskey) are contained in Asinof's notes.

Arnold "Chick" Gandil and Cicotte were the two White Sox players who were the most clearly implicated in the "fix." Asinof claimed that Gandil had been a "source" for *8MO*. In the book, for example, Asinof writes that in a private meeting between Gandil and Jackson, "the big Southerner [Jackson] insisted on getting \$20,000 for his participation." In *BBL*, however, Asinof admits that "when it came to talking about the 1919 World Series, Gandil had nothing to contribute." Consistent with Asinof's revelation in *BBL*, no notes of conversations between Asinof and Gandil are found in the Museum's collection.

In his notes, Asinof also identifies "Harry F.," who was almost certainly a fictional character, as a "source" for *8MO*. Even if "Harry F." had really existed, it seems unlikely that Asinof would have been able to track down such a nefarious character over 40 years after the scandal, or that "Harry F." would admit to threatening a player with murder. Indeed, the incident was probably made up out of whole cloth. Other than being identified as someone he "talked to," no mention of "Harry F.," or anyone who provided information similar to what Asinof attributes to the thug, is made in the author's notes or research. On the other hand, in Asinof's files there is a note from an interview with the Sox pitcher, Faber, that it was the White Sox shortstop, Charles "Swede" Risberg, who "threatened to kill anyone who talked and he was the type that might."

Asinof also claims that he talked to Risberg, but there are no notes to prove it. He also claims to have spoken with Dickie Kerr, one of the Sox players who was not involved in the "fix,"

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no notes of any conversation between Asinof and Kerr are to be found. Moreover, while Asinof identified two members of the 1919 team as his sources for *8MO* (banned player Oscar “Happy” Felsch and Hall of Famer, Faber, who was never implicated in the fix), his file only contains a few pages of notes on conversations with these men, and none suggest any first-hand knowledge of the “fix.” Indeed, the only reference to the scandal in the notes of the Felsch interview is that he viewed himself as a “victim.” Faber’s second-hand account (he was ill with the Spanish Flu during the 1919 World Series and had no prior knowledge of the “fix”) contradicts Asinof’s account in *8MO*. The notes from Asinof’s interview reflect Faber’s belief that “[w]hat seems likely is that the players agreed to lose, then did as well as they could ...” to avoid defeat. Faber’s comments are in stark contrast to Asinof’s account that the players took money and then deliberately lost.

In the same note that purportedly lists his sources, Asinof identifies “Dutch” Ruether, one of Cincinnati’s players in the 1919 Series, as someone he “talked” to when writing *8MO*. But Asinof’s notes do not show any conversations with Ruether. Additionally, Ruether sued Asinof in 1976, claiming that Asinof in *8MO* had defamed him. It seems unlikely that Asinof would have faced a lawsuit by Ruether if he had actually spoken to him when writing *8MO*.

Other than Gandil, Cicotte would have no doubt been the second most important person for Asinof to interview when researching *8MO*. A September 15, 1961 letter from Asinof to Cicotte, which is also in the Museum’s collection, shows that Cicotte provided no information to Asinof. He was the team’s star pitcher, yet he lost two of the games in the Series and he is commonly portrayed as one of the Black Sox players at the heart of the “fix.” Asinof tried to enlist Cicotte’s cooperation by offering to tell a sympathetic story, presumably to portray the purportedly greedy Comiskey as the one who precipitated the

betrayal. In a penciled autograph (of no small value) written on Asinof’s letter to Cicotte, Cicotte declined, stating, “I am not interested, thanks for remembering me.” While perhaps not as egregious as the clearly fictitious aspects of the story and Asinof’s references to Grabiner, Gandil, “Harry F.,” Ruether and others as those whom he actually talked to, Asinof’s attempt to induce a key player’s cooperation by offering to depict him as sympathetic certainly raises questions about his objectivity.

In *8MO*, Asinof reports that “... Joe Jackson had been a disappointment to himself, playing ball with only part of himself working. He tried to hit, he didn’t try to hit.” It is, however, revealing that Asinof’s notes do not contain any significant or previously unknown material regarding “Shoeless” Joe. Asinof never spoke to “Shoeless” Joe.

The baseball legend died of heart failure in 1951 - long before Asinof began researching and writing *8MO*. The book’s portrayal of “Shoeless” Joe as having helped to actually throw the Series clearly ignores the very real possibility that he may very well have been guilty *only* of taking \$5,000 from a teammate *after* the Series (as he testified in the 1924 civil trial), and not of deliberately botching a single play; much less a game or the entire Series. Asinof also apparently did not believe the likes of White Sox player, Williams, who claimed publicly that “Shoeless” Joe never attended any meetings with the gambler-fixers and that the ballplayers used his name only to gain credibility and bargain for more money.

In the 1921 criminal trial against him, “Shoeless” Joe who testified to the Grand Jury that he had not made any intentional errors during the “whole Series,” had “batted to win,” “run the bases to win,” “fielded the balls in the outfield to win,” and “tried to win all the time,” was subsequently found innocent by a unanimous 12-member jury. “Shoeless” Joe was again vindicated when, in 1924, after being

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examined on the witness stand for the better part of two days, he won a jury verdict of \$16,711.04 in the suit against Comiskey. Although the 1924 verdict was later thrown out by the Milwaukee judge, “Shoeless” Joe, who could barely write his name, let alone read, was successful in managing to convince 23 people, in two separate trials and in two different states, of his innocence! More importantly, “Shoeless” Joe never confessed to personally “throwing” the Series, as Asinof claims in both *8MO* and *BBL*.

Asinof no doubt rode the coattails of the media’s dramatic portrayal of the proceedings in 1920 to give *8MO* more appeal to the public and to increase the chances of his book being made into a movie. The recently released materials that belonged to Asinof include several fictional screenplays of the Black Sox scandal that he wrote while he was researching *8MO*. Beginning in 1963, he worked diligently to see *8MO* made into a movie. In 1988, the successful film, also titled “*Eight Men Out*,” was described by *USA Today* as “The Best Baseball Movie Ever.” The fact that Asinof prepared full screenplays based upon the scandal raises the question of whether he “borrowed” from them to recount events and conversations for which no apparent proof exists.

Even today, almost a century later, there is no scene more often associated with the dark side of professional sports than that of a young boy pulling on the trousers of “Shoeless” Joe as he left the Grand Jury proceedings in Chicago. Captured in a headline by the *Chicago Daily News* on September 29, 1920, a young, nameless lad is reported as saying, “Say it ain’t so, Joe, say it ain’t so.” What is now verifiably true is that if historians, including Asinof, would have shown more fairness to “Shoeless” Joe, his answer to the pleading child would have been more accurately reported as, “*It ain’t so, kid, it just ain’t so.*”

Indeed, in a published interview in the October, 1949 issue of *Sport Magazine* (given to columnist Furman Bisher over a decade before

Asinof began researching and writing *8MO*), “Shoeless” Joe categorically denied that the brief conversation between him and the kid ever occurred. In this interview, “Shoeless” Joe claims that he tried to report his suspicions of a “fix” to Comiskey, that he never met any of the gambler-fixers, that he never agreed to throw the Series and that his performance in the Series supports his innocence. Asinof vaguely alludes to this interview in *8MO* where he claims, albeit erroneously, that “Shoeless” Joe’s “denials took on an increased fervor – and, perhaps, exaggeration – as the years went by.” Asinof, in fact, possessed the full article in which Jackson denied making the statement, but he failed to include this information in *8MO*.

The public’s broad-based acceptance of Asinof’s retelling of the 1919 scandal is reflected by the fact that few people are even aware that “Shoeless” Joe’s performance during the 1919 World Series was no less than superb, with a brilliant .375 batting average (better than his lifetime average of .356 over 13 seasons), and the fact that he had six runs batted in, the only homerun in the Series, five runs scored, 12 hits and not a single error. “Shoeless” Joe, who still holds the third-highest lifetime batting average, had a batting average in the 1919 World Series greater than his batting average during each of the regular seasons between 1914 and 1919. If “Shoeless” Joe really did try to lose games then he failed miserably as he led both the White Sox and the Reds regulars in batting during the 1919 Series.

It is plain that there is nothing new in Asinof’s notes and research of the writing of *8MO*, now housed at the Chicago History Museum, that can be used as evidence to directly implicate Jackson, George “Buck” Weaver or any other player in contributing to the Chicago White Sox’s loss of the 1919 World Series. The only support for Asinof’s claim that they

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deliberately threw games is in contemporaneous press accounts, which were published before the various trials arising out of the scandal and which this article previously showed to be based upon second- or third-hand information, and, in some cases, clearly false. Asinof, who writes in great detail about the gambler-fixers, may have, himself, been playing the ultimate bluff. He did not release his research during his lifetime and also suggested in *8MO* that his story was based upon exclusive, never-before-seen evidence. In reality the lack of any solid, direct evidence in his notes, as well as the lack of a single footnote in *8MO*, strongly suggest that his story was largely fiction. Direct evidence, such as “Shoeless” Joe’s performance during the 1919 Series and his repeated denials of wrongdoing, suggest nothing more than “Shoeless” Joe’s bad judgment in taking money from his teammate and roommate, Williams, and not being more aggressive and timely in reporting his suspicion of the “fix” to Comiskey, Grabiner or William “Kid” Gleason, the White Sox manager in 1919.

The prominence of “Shoeless” Joe in American culture – such as his depiction in the legendary movie *Field of Dreams* as a symbol of “a part of our past [that] reminds of all that once was good, and it could be again” – suggests that the public intuitively questions whether history was fair to

the “big Southerner.” The same can be said for all of the other Black Sox players – while Asinof paints all eight with the same brush of guilt, his notes are woefully lacking of evidence suggesting that they actually did wrong. Rather than identifying plausible sources and notes of interviews for Asinof’s story of the scandal, his files suggest that *8MO* is far more *historical fiction* than the *authoritative* source that many believe it to be.

History is a collection of commonly-accepted facts written by the winners, and experience teaches that once accepted, a certain perception of history is difficult, if not impossible, to correct. “Shoeless” Joe, a baseball great, is consistently snubbed for admittance into the Baseball Hall of Fame as a result of these erroneous but long-standing misconceptions. In this case, history must be corrected to reflect that “Shoeless” Joseph Jefferson Jackson consistently expressed his innocence, and that there is no basis to blame Comiskey for the scandal as a consequence of his miserliness. “Shoeless” Joe deserves recognition for his contribution to the sport, and vindication of his name and reputation. Likewise, Comiskey deserves recognition for accomplishments as an owner, manager and player during the formative years of baseball, rather than as the cause of the 1919 scandal. At the very least, baseball historians and fans owe “Shoeless” Joe, Charles Comiskey and Chicago’s “Black Sox” an apology.

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