

Tom Marshall's Weekly News, September 29, 2008

Major League Baseball: Earlier, I talked about celebrities in Yorklyn, most of whom attended the trapshooting tournament. I mentioned that although several big league ball players were here, I did not think Babe Ruth was ever among them. From local historian Jack Harrison, who grew up in Yorklyn, however, I learned that a very large man participated in a fox hunt that came across the snuff mill farm (about half of which is now part of the Auburn Heights Preserve) about 1930. Close examination proved the figure was the Babe himself, doubtless a guest of New York Yankee pitcher Herb Pennock, a resident of Kennett Square. This story seems to be appropriate since the final game in the "House that Ruth built" (Yankee Stadium) took place last week.

For the few of us who follow the Phillies, the past weekend was a thriller, with Saturday's clincher of the National League East title being a real nail-biter in the 9th inning. It brings to mind a simpler time in professional sports, when baseball reigned supreme. In the 1930s and through the World War II period when I first followed such things, there were 16 major league teams, eight in each league. There was no Inter-league play and no divisions. The Phillies played each of the seven other teams in the National League 22 times, 11 at home and 11 away, for a total of 154 games in the regular season. The Philadelphia Athletics played each of the seven other teams in the American League 22 times, on the same basis. The only post season was the World Series, when the teams that won the pennant in each league played each other in a best-of-seven play-off. This part seemed to be completely and mathematically fair.

Both leagues were weighted heavily toward the northeastern U.S., however, which was not very fair. No team represented a city farther south than Washington, D.C., Cincinnati, or St. Louis, and no team was west of St. Louis. New York (including Brooklyn) had three teams, Boston, Philadelphia, Chicago, and St. Louis had two each, with the American League also having teams in Washington, Cleveland, and Detroit, and the National League in Pittsburgh and Cincinnati. During the time period mentioned above, the New York Yankees usually won the World Series. There were eight teams in the Pacific Coast League, which was very good, but this was not considered a "big league" and was not involved in the World Series. I attended a Pacific Coast League game in Sacramento in 1945.

Things started to change in the mid-1950s, when the Boston Braves went to Milwaukee, the Philadelphia Athletics to Kansas City, and the Brooklyn Dodgers to Los Angeles. The Giants went from New York to San Francisco, and the Washington Senators and the St. Louis Browns went somewhere (or out of business). By the mid-1960s, the Braves were in Atlanta and the A's in Oakland. When the Phillies almost won the National League pennant in 1964, there were still eight teams in the league with no divisions, but expansion was coming, and the first expansion, to two divisions, made sense. Each league was expanded from eight to 12 teams, with an Eastern and a Western Division, six teams per division. The Phillies, like all other teams in both leagues, played the other five teams in their division 18 times, nine at home and nine away, and the six teams in the other division 12 times each, six at home and six away, for a total of 162 games. Again, what could be more fair? Several teams were called "expansion teams," the worst of which was the New York Mets, managed by Casey Stengel. I think they lost 120 games in their first year. Once you won your division, you had a best-of-five play-off with the other division champion in your league, and then to the World Series. That's how it was in 1980, when the Phillies won the World Championship from the Kansas City Royals, four games to two. Now it's possible for the champions to have to play 19 post-season games before they win the Series. I promise there will be no more baseball for many months to come.