A Home for the Cubs

The humble beginnings of Wrigley Field

BY GREG RIENZI

Three decades after it was built, Wrigley Field hosted the Tiger-Cubs World Series in 1945. Tickets for the final game went on sale at 8 a.m. on Oct.9; lines started forming at around 6 p.m. the preceding day.

Charles "Lucky Charlie" Weeghman served up a circus-like spectacle for the Chicago Cubs' opening day on April 20, 1916. The Cubs had a new home—the north side ballpark that would later be dubbed Wrigley Field—and the team's new owner wanted fans to embrace a fresh era for the 40-year-old National League franchise.

A consummate promoter and salesman, Weeghman had the team parade through the Windy City streets to Weeghman (pronounced Weg-man) Park, built two years prior. The pregame ceremony included a marching band, fireworks and even a bear cub and zookeeper from the Lincoln Park Zoo. (The bear, nicknamed "Joa" after Cubs minority owner Jonathan Ogden Armour, would later be housed in a cage outside the park, on Addison Street.)

Weeghman, a self-made millionaire who started his career as a waiter making $10 a week, then went on to earn his fortune as a food-counter chain entrepreneur, had waited years for this signature moment.

Eager to own a baseball team, he had unsuccessfully tried to purchase the St. Louis Cardinals in 1911. So he seized on an opportunity three years later to join the fledgling Federal League, an independent or "outlaw" league that wanted to compete with the established American and National Leagues of professional baseball.

Weeghman founded the Chicago Federals, one of eight teams in the new league, and built a stadium for the team in the Lake View neighborhood, on the former site of the Chicago Lutheran Theological Seminary. Later on, Cubs fans could thus lay claim that Weeghman Park/Wrigley Field was built on "hallowed ground."

Construction of the 14,000-seat Weeghman Park, designed by architect Zachary Taylor Davis, began on March 14, 1914. The steel and concrete stadium cost $250,000 ($5.6 million in today's dollars) and featured a single-story grandstand, a small section of bleachers in right field, 4,000 yards of soil and four acres of bluegrass in the outfield. A modest park by the day's standards, Weeghman paled in comparison to the Chicago White Sox's Comiskey Park, also designed by Davis, which had been built in 1910 and dubbed "the baseball palace of the world."

After the Federals' first season, Weeghman held a contest to rename the team. The fans chose the Chicago Whales, which according to Cubs historian Ed Hartig, referenced the team's "A Whale of a Club" slogan and the nearby Waveland Avenue that would flood after rains.

Wrigley's famous hand-operated scoreboard; a poster of Mordecai "Three-Finger" Brown; slugger Babe Ruth in 1918.

Though a few major league players had jumped to the upstart Federal League, or threatened to jump, the league ultimately could not sustain interest. It folded after just two seasons, in 1915.

Weeghman, as part of a Major League Baseball settlement, was allowed to purchase 90 percent of the financially troubled Cubs for the price of $500,000 (roughly $11.2 million today).

The Cubs had been playing in the West Side Grounds in an ethnic part of town, where they enjoyed a heyday. They won a record 116 games in 1906 and one year later triumphed in the World Series, besting the Detroit Tigers. While the Cubs boasted a winning tradition in the old stadium, the park had its quirks. Sections of the dilapidated wooden park burst into flames on several occasions—one time forcing players to come to the aid of fans.

Weeghman's decision to move the team to the north side of Chicago angered some supporters, and was a bit of a gamble, according to Hartig. "The West Side Grounds was closer to the downtown area and the new park was in an area not very well developed at the time," he says. "Some thought he was abandoning his fan base or giving up on the West Side."

To bring Weeghman Park up to major league standards, Weeghman added more bleachers and brought capacity up to 16,000. Major League Baseball at the time had 16 teams, eight each in the American and National Leagues. Most of the stars of the day resided in the American League, including the likes of Babe Ruth (then a pitcher with the Boston Red Sox), Ty Cobb and "Shoeless Joe" Jackson. The National League could claim future Hall of Famers Rogers Hornsby, Grover Alexander and Zack Wheat.

The Cubs began play in their new stadium toward the tail end of the "dead-ball era" (the period—from about 1900 through 1919 and Babe Ruth's emergence as a power hitter—when a ball was often used for the whole game). Cy Williams, the team's left-handed-hitting center fielder, would lead the majors in homers that season with a paltry 12—a far cry from today's home run totals. "The game back then heavily relied on bunting and stealing. Triples were more common than home runs," Hartig says.

And players didn't live or travel in luxury, he notes. "This was also before commercial air travel and teams went by bus from city to city."

The Cubs won Opening Day in extra innings, beating the Cincinnati Reds, 7-6, but would go on to finish the 1916 season with an unspectacular 67-86 record.

The highlight of the season came on Sept. 4 when pitching legends Christy Mathewson and Mordecai "Three-Finger" Brown squared off in what was the final game of their heralded careers. For the much-hyped contest, the Cubs made a poster of Brown's famous right hand, which was missing parts on two fingers due to a farm machinery accident in his youth. To the disappointment of Cubs fans, Mathewson's Reds carried the day, 10-8.

Peter Alter, an archivist at the Chicago History Museum, believes that Weeghman Park would largely be unrecognizable to the modern fan. The stadium, he said, needed to evolve

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before it could be appreciated. "It was a modest, second-rate park in its own town when it opened, but the ballpark stuck around and aged well," Alter says.

Beginning in 1922, the renamed Cubs Park underwent several renovations. The grandstands were moved back 60 feet and wooden bleachers were added, increasing the capacity to 20,000.

Weeghman went bankrupt in the early 1920s and was forced to sell controlling shares of the team to chewing gum magnate William Wrigley Jr. Thus, in 1926, Cubs Park was renamed Wrigley Field. To increase seating capacity to 38,396, Wrigley constructed a double-decked grandstand, while lowering the playing field and removing the bleachers in left field.

More renovations occurred in 1937. Bill Veeck constructed the famous hand-operated scoreboard behind new bleachers in center field. (The scoreboard remains a manual affair to this day, and still has never been hit by a batted ball.) Also that year, Veeck planted 200 Boston ivy plants and 350 Japanese bittersweet plants—curling vines that would spread to create the signature look for Wrigley Field's outfield wall.

Lights for Wrigley Field were originally to be installed for the 1942 season. However, because of the U.S. involvement in World War II and the bombing of Pearl Harbor, Wrigley decided to donate the lights to a shipyard for the war effort instead.

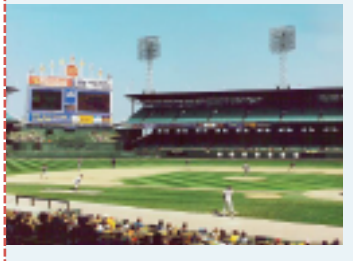
Wrigley Field would stay dark at night for the next 46 years, limiting the Cubs to day games only when playing at home. Not until 1988, after baseball officials refused to allow Wrigley to host any postseason games without lights, was the stadium illuminated.

Today, Wrigley Field is the second oldest major league ballpark, only behind Boston's Fenway Park, which opened in 1912.

Since the 1940s, Wrigley Field has changed little, save for the addition of the lights. What also hasn't changed is the Cubs' notable absence of World Series titles. But each season, loyal Cubs fans turn out to support their team. At Wrigley Field, it seems, hope springs eternal.

Take Me Out to the Ball Game

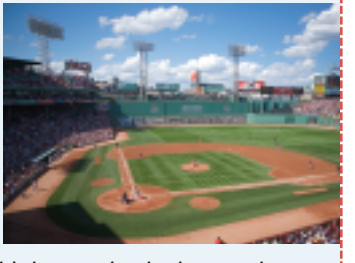
Wrigley Field wasn't the only game in town in 1916—or the country, for that matter. Some other notable baseball parks of the day, and what made them unique:



Comiskey Park: Home to the Chicago White Sox from 1910 to 1990, the park was named for its builder, Charles Comiskey. During its 81-year history, it was the site of 6,000 games, including four World Series (one played by the Chicago Cubs, because there wasn't enough seating at Wrigley Field). The stadium originally sat a record 32,000 fans, earning it the nickname "The Baseball Palace of the World." Comiskey Park was demolished and turned into a parking lot in 1991, when the White Sox moved across the street to U.S. Cellular Field.

Forbes Field: The Pittsburgh Pirates opened this park in the Oakland neighborhood of Pittsburgh, Pa., with a game against the Chicago Cubs on June 30, 1909—and faced the Cubs again for their last game in the stadium on June 28, 1970. Renowned for a rock hard infield that caused unpredictable bounces (and earned it the nickname "The House of Thrills"), Forbes Field was demolished in 1971; today the space it once filled holds the library and dorms of the University of Pittsburgh.

The Polo Grounds: Just north of Central Park in New York City, the site (originally constructed in 1876 for polo games) saw a succession of four different stadiums that culminated in "Polo Grounds IV" in 1911. The new stadium proved good luck for the New York Giants, who went on to win the National League pennant in 1911, 1912 and 1913. The New York Yankees also briefly made their home here, from 1913-1922, before building Yankee Stadium across the Harlem River. In 1951, Bobby Thomson's famous line drive home run—"The Shot Heard 'Round the World"—soared into the lower deck of the left-field stands. The stadium was demolished in 1964, but not before the New York Mets played there in 1962-63. (The Giants had moved to San Francisco in 1957.)



Fenway Park: Opened in 1912 as home to the Boston Red Sox, Fenway Park is the oldest Major League Baseball stadium still in use. With its location in the densely populated neighborhood near Boston's Kenmore Square, it blends in so well with surrounding buildings that first-time visitors sometimes drive right by. Once inside, though, avid fans (known as the "Red Sox Nation") can't miss the famous "Green Monster"—the 37-foot, 2-inch high wall in left field that's just 305 to 315 feet from home plate, making it a popular target for right-handed hitters. Other notables: the lone red seat in right field that marks the longest home run ever hit (502 feet, by Ted Williams), and the retired numbers of the team's greats on the right-field façade.