

Radio Baseball Days (April 21, 2019)

Wilmette is a comfortable suburb north of Chicago, and after I moved here in 2002, I would drive to certain neighborhoods at night and try to receive on my car radio Cardinal's baseball broadcasts. They could reach northern Illinois direct from KMOX in St. Louis. This required an elevated spot, such as the intersection of Wilmette and Ridge Ave., where reception was often so clear that an uninformed listener might think he was hearing a broadcast from the Loop. Or I might drive along Ridge Ave. in Evanston, which was also elevated, and only a few minutes from Northwestern University. The signal from KMOX is powerful enough to cross Illinois and perhaps even reach Wisconsin. Sometimes I went out to the car for the sole purpose of receiving the broadcast of an important game, dropping work that I should have been doing. I would linger by the curb and wait for a critical moment in the game to pass.

Then baseball came to the internet, at least in a limited way. Before "streaming" entered our vocabulary, Major League Baseball set up a website that indicated the progressive pitch count and scoring and the number of men on base, if any, changing graphics and information pitch by pitch. There was no accompanying broadcast. I can remember the distress of taking in the very end of a Cubs-Cardinal game when St. Louis had the bases loaded in a game they were losing. I followed the game pitch by pitch on the computer screen in a silent

library, hoping against hope for a big inning. On that day, at least, it didn't happen. The game ended (for me) when the computer mutely registered a strikeout of the last Cardinal batter. Something terrible had happened. But instead of the groan of a broadcaster or that of 40,000 fans, I felt my sharp disappointment in a silent room surrounded by diligent medical school students. I imagined they were peering at anatomy texts, unaware of the debacle that had just happened. Think of Auden's *Musee des Beaux Arts* and the fate of Icarus.

All of this ended with the advent of internet radio baseball. Some years ago, for the paltry season-long fee of \$20, the public gained access via the internet to the broadcast of every game in baseball, including the ones in Spanish. I still listen to Cardinal broadcasts when I'm driving, but I no longer linger in particular neighborhoods where reception is best. I simply resume listening on my desktop PC when I've returned to my apartment.

I was reminded of all this by perusing—I won't say reading, almost nobody could do that—Curt Smith's *Voice of the Game*, a history of radio baseball that was first published in 1987 and republished in a second edition in 1992. The writing is often clotted and follows a dated style. If Smith introduces a description of the first Tigers broadcast in 1926, he'll tell you that this happened when Coolidge was president, that Mussolini was preparing the invasion of Ethiopia, and

that Gloria Swanson at the time was starring in a now-forgotten movie. These details, I supposed, are meant “to place” the moment in history for the reader.

It is hard to imagine anyone other than a copyeditor reading through the book in its entirety. The details on the lives of long-forgotten broadcasters and their careers are simply voluminous. But there are interesting facts here nonetheless, and I can readily imagine browsing the document for the occasional unexpected detail. You can learn that the first baseball broadcast took place in 1921 on KDKA in Pittsburgh, from a ground-level box seat at Forbes Field. (The station, owned by Westinghouse, had opened the year before and broadcasted the results of the 1920 presidential election.) The announcer was Harold Arlen, who was using a converted telephone for a microphone. The transmitter would sometimes fail, and crowd noise could drown out the broadcast.

“We didn’t know what the reaction would be,” Arlen told Smith in an interview some sixty years later—“whether we’d be talking into a total vacuum or whether somebody would actually hear us.” Radio ownership was pretty limited back then. “No one had the foggiest idea, the slightest hint of an inkling, that what we’d started would take off like it did.” The first World Series broadcast took place a year later, in October 1922, from the Polo Grounds in New York. The Giants beat the Yankees in five games, but the final two never reached the air; the intended broadcasts failed to attract sufficient advertising.

In 1924, WMAQ in Chicago became the first station to broadcast every home game of the White Sox and the Cubs. But teams lacked a monopoly over broadcast rights, and within a few years, according to Smith, five radio stations were transmitting broadcasts of Cubs' games. The first Cardinals broadcast took place from Sportsman's Park in 1927, and in 1941, Dizzy Dean, his playing days over, was hired to narrate the games. Imperfectly educated, Dean "told of runners who 'slud,' pitchers who 'throwed the ball,' and batters standing 'confidentially' at the plate."

Mel Allen, Red Barber, Vin Scully, Lindsay Nelson, Ernie Harwell, Harry Caray, Bob Prince, Jack Brickhouse, Russ Hodges, Curt Gowdy—that is a rollcall of the broadcasters that professionalized the business in the 1930s and 1940s. You'll learn plenty about them in *Voices of the Game*. In 1935, Ronald Reagan sat in a booth in a Des Moines radio station and tried to broadcast a game that was played hundreds of miles away. An employee sitting outside of the sound booth received over a telephone reports from the stadium, relayed pitch by pitch, while the station dubbed in the roar of the crowd and the crack of the bat. Reagan in turn had to improvise a broadcast. Matters got difficult when his co-worker lost contact with the game. Men at other stations were doing the same thing, and a few were actually watching the game at the park. Reagan felt that if he interrupted the broadcast by disclosing the facts, the audience would drift away to the competition.

So he simply extended an at-bat, at times by several minutes, by describing nonevents that *might* be happening—a pitcher fooling around with the resin bag, foul ball after foul ball, line drives that just went to the wrong side of the pole in the outfield. This was radio baseball in its early days.

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