



# Diamonds and old cards are baseball fans' best friends

By LOUISE OKRUTSKY

Before football became the macho American's choice, there was baseball.

Before salaries skyrocketed to make players wealthy and before Joltin' Joe Dimaggio metamorphosed into Mr. Coffee, baseball was celebrated on corner sandlots and tradition-laden stadiums.

The mystique of baseball drew Bill Benton of West Bloomfield to collecting its artifacts. Bit by bit, the Farmington Hills city finance department employee collected relics of baseball's better moments.

Some of those momentos are on display in Farmington Hills City Hall, 11 Nile and Orchard Lake roads.

The collection began a few years ago when Benton, 29, found a stack of old baseball cards for sale while browsing through a flea market.

Like almost everyone else Benton had thrown out his vintage '50s collection of baseball cards. It's an act he's come to rue as he adds to his collection.

The value of old baseball cards has skyrocketed. The lot which Benton purchased at the flea market increased 10 times its original value in three years, he said.

COLLECTORS' conventions featuring high prices for the cards help keep their value on the rise, according to Benton.

He prefers to shy away from conventions and frequents flea markets when he wants to add to his collection. The thrifty collector only buys baseball cards when the price is right.

His disenchantment with the high cost of baseball cards led him to start collecting baseball publications. The magazines make up the bulk of his baseball memorabilia.

A prize 1935 tabloid addition to the Detroit Free Press features a sports writer who used the pseudonym, "Ifly the Dopester."

Ifly wrote about the good old days of baseball during the turn of the century. In the days of Babe Ruth, fans had a yen for the glamorous era of Ty Cobb.

Colorful newspaper stories are only a portion of baseball's lore. Die-hard fans' cherished dreams of catching a baseball during a game live on in Benton's collection.

"It's rare to get a baseball during a game," Benton admits.

As a young fan attending just about every Tiger home game, he usually arrived at the park early and caught stray baseballs during batting practice.

AFTER BATTING practice he would approach players for their autograph.

"After practice there was less activity," explained Benton. "They weren't bothered if you asked them then."

Another method of autograph seeking involved equal vigilance.

"You keep your eyes and ears open," he said.

During autograph days, Benton managed to snag the signatures of Ted Williams and Joe Dimaggio.

Larger items make their appearance in the collection, too.

With green seats now an endangered species because of the Tiger Stadium remodeling project, Benton managed to grab one before the orange paint went on.

His escapade took place after the Detroit-Boston game in 1972 when the Tigers took the Eastern Division title and became eligible for the American League Playoff — and the fans went berserk.

He was sitting in the bleachers. When the fans stormed the field, Benton was

pushed across the stadium into the box seats. Eying the unanchored box seat chairs, Benton took a fancy to them and carried one past several police officers who were more interested in watching the rowdies in the crowd.

DURING THE 1971 All Star game in Detroit, he came back with a red, white and blue banner which had hung across the stadium. The souvenir is in the Farmington Hills display case.

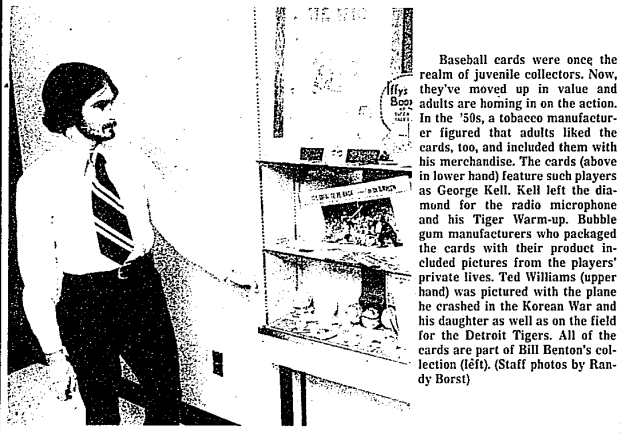
Acquisition of the banner involved being hoisted onto the facing of the stadium and grabbing at the flag with one hand.

"The fans below were encouraging me," Benton recalled.

But watching baseball teams has lost some of its allure for Benton. He prefers to participate instead of watch these days and has embraced running, including the Boston Marathon.

Even then, the lure of Fenway Park still has some sway.

"I take in a Red Sox game when I'm there," he admitted.



Baseball cards were once the realm of juvenile collectors. Now, they've moved up in value and adults are homing in on the action. In the '50s, a tobacco manufacturer figured that adults liked the cards, too, and included them with his merchandise. The cards (above in lower hand) feature such players as George Kell. Kell left the diamond for the radio microphone and his Tiger Warm-up. Bubble gum manufacturers who packaged the cards with their product included pictures from the players' private lives. Ted Williams (upper hand) was pictured with the plane he crashed in the Korean War and his daughter as well as on the field for the Detroit Tigers. All of the cards are part of Bill Benton's collection (left). (Staff photos by Randy Borst)



The tiger on Ifly the Dopester's book is a far cry from the one that disced down to Tiger Fever on Detroit's new scoreboard but fans of the '30s wanted the facts at their finger tips, just as they do today. (Staff photo by Randy Borst)

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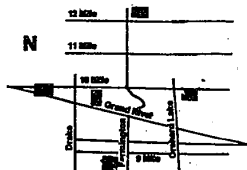
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