

*The Ball once struck off,
Away flies the Boy, To*

The Next Destin'd Post

And then Home with Joy

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Interview with Bill Ryczek

Protoball: Nearly 30 years ago, you set off on a trail that would produce three books (*Blackguards and Red Stockings*, *When Johnnie Came Sliding Home*, and *Baseball's First Inning*) covering base ball's early history from its origins to the demise of its first professional league in 1875. Was this your master plan, or did the writing and research just take on its own momentum? Had you long thought you might want to write base ball books?

Bill Ryczek: I was always intrigued by the fact that virtually nothing had been written about the National Association, which was America's first professional sports league. My plan was that when I retired I would begin researching and writing about the NA and then possibly move forward. In 1981, I had some surgery and faced about six weeks at home. I decided to start about 40 years ahead of schedule, and once I got into the research, realized that a lot had happened *prior* to 1871, so I started working backwards. So, I did have a plan, but the starting point was 40 years off and it was executed in reverse.

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Protoball: Our understanding of early ballplaying is a lot richer than it was ten years ago owing to digital searches and so on. Are there areas for which our past conventional wisdom is shakier than it was, and where we need to be ready to rethink our past bromides?

Bill Ryczek: The main change in my thought process over the past 30 years is the realization that documentation is what someone wrote down and preserved, and not necessarily what actually happened. I think we have assumed that what we found was inclusive, when in fact we now know indirectly that many things happened that were not well-documented. The primary example of this, in my opinion, is the credit given to the Knickerbockers, and I certainly deserve ample blame in this regard. The Knickerbockers may not have been the first organization, or the best ball players, but they were undoubtedly the best historians and note-takers, which gave their story precedence over others that were equally or even more important. And Alexander Cartwright also had the support of some good PR. There are undoubtedly other areas where what we know is probably

exclusive of important data that we are unaware of. Most things we find in this regard come to us by accident—when someone like George Thompson reads the 1818 *National Police Gazette* to find out who strangled who in the Bowery and uncovers a baseball gem.

Protoball: By the time you started work on *Baseball's First Inning*, you already knew a lot about where the game was headed in later decades. Did anything in your research on the 1840-1860 period alter your prior impressions of its earliest days?

Bill Ryczek: The primary sources I used didn't present any major surprises, but many of the secondary sources researched by others have really changed the way we view baseball's origins, particularly the work of David Block and John Thorn. In my opinion, Peter Morris has taught us a lot about the "who" in terms of the genealogical research that enabled us to get to know the men of the early era, and David and John have enlightened us to "how" and "why." I consider myself more of a storyteller than a researcher, and I strive to learn enough about the story to feel a part of it and be able to relate the tale almost as a participant.

Protoball: The research on your base ball books started in the age of the non-memory typewriter and Dewey decimal cards and wrapped up in the age of Google and the 19CBB list-serve. Which era has been more fun for you?

Bill Ryczek: We can be much more productive today, which is great, but the thrill of compiling new information is sometimes lost, because it's already there. It's like taking great pride in your ability to read road maps and find obscure places and learning that it is an irrelevant skill with the invention of the GPS. The ability to gather data more easily, however, allows us to focus on interpretation and analysis. There's no doubt that the ability to access information from our desk top rather than traveling hundreds of miles has made our work much easier.

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Find Story: How Sam Marchiano Unearthed the 1755 William Bray Diary

“March 31, 1755 – Went to Miss Seale's to play at Base Ball . . .”

It was the summer of 2006. If you insisted on strictly provable evidence (not all of us actually did), the earliest appearance of the term “base ball” was to be found in a 1796 description of “Englische base ball” by the German writer Johann GutsMuths.

That threshold was about to be pushed back 40 years, and suddenly. And neither snazzy high-tech digital searches nor dogged library digging would have anything to do with it; instead, the key finders were an American documentary director from New York City, and a sharp-eyed English lady who lived snugly in a 1500's house in southern England.

That summer, MLB.com's Sam Marchiano was at work on what was to become her award-winning film *Base Ball Discovered*. One day she and her small crew were in Horsham England, filming predecessor games that persist in England yet -- stoolball and rounders. And thus on this fateful day, an eager collection of teenage

girls enjoyed a game of rounders in front of an American film crew, and that crew itself was the subject of interest by a second camera crew, this one belonging to a BBC South news crew.

Late that afternoon, Tricia St. John Barry happened to glance up to spot BBC News covering the Americans covering schoolgirl ballplaying, and she understood the BBC reporter to claim that the term “base ball” was known back to the 1790’s. But Tricia knew better than that. So she called BBC South. BBC South then called Sam.

About 20 years earlier, Tricia St. John Barry had heard from a friend who was making storage space in an old shed by discarding some really ancient piles of paper, with the help of a bonfire. Already being known as fond of really old things, Tricia had stepped in and salvaged what turned out to be an ancient diary by the 19-year-old William Bray. His entry for March 31 was a one-sentence record of a day that was evidently highlighted by church attendance, by drinking tea into the evening, and playing “base-ball” with six young ladies and four young gentlemen (see <http://protoball.org/1755.3>). Tricia had been planning to transcribe the whole 1755 diary at some point, but the time to do that was never quite right. But that “base ball” reference had caught her attention, and while not a lover of sport, she had remembered the term. Thus, Sam Marchiano suddenly became an effective first-line origins researcher as well as documentarian. She would soon work this happy new find into the documentary itself. We recently asked Sam about the find:

Protoball: What were your immediate thoughts when the call came in from BBC?

Sam Marchiano: I was surprised. I knew, of course, that what we were doing was only on the fringe of mainstream interest. I thought, “how very British and how very smart!”

Protoball: What had that day been like, up to then?

Sam Marchiano: The day was mainly a blur because one of our crew members had gotten into a minor car accident and so I was dealing with all the shoot logistics plus insurance issues. I was terrified of costing MLB a lot of money, and what that might mean.

Protoball: What were your thoughts when you read the actual diary text?

Sam Marchiano: That came a lot later, because Tricia couldn’t actually locate the diary right away, and I had to leave for home. Luckily, David Block was still in England and he helped handle the filming of the actual manuscript once it did turn up. My main thought when I read it was that I wished there were more! But then we all got caught up in squeezing full meaning from what was there on the page.

Protoball: Once you had spent some time with a few origins-mad researchers, what did you think of this odd little band of diggers?

Sam Marchiano: It didn’t change anything. I just liked everyone even more on a personal level. Searching for knowledge and truth is the most awesome pursuit. Whether it’s the origins of baseball or the meaning of life, it’s all the same.

Protoball: How does it feel to have been the principal actor in the finding of what was perhaps the earliest tangible evidence of English base-ball? Do you become tired of autograph seekers?

Sam Marchiano: Hah. I just keep hoping someone will actually add the find to the wiki page on William Bray. It's the only way that the find really counts, right . . . if it's got a good wiki page?

Protoball: How did you ever get interested in baseball's origins?

Sam Marchiano: Through seeing vintage baseball, which by any measure is fun to watch. Then I read somewhere – either in David's 2005 book or in Martin Hoerchner's UK SABR newsletter – that baseball's precursors were still being played, and could be filmed. But ultimately, I loved the idea of being able to help shatter an invention myth and put things in an evolutionary light.

Protoball: What surprised you most about the reception to *Base Ball Discovered*?

Sam Marchiano: That MLB Network aired it.

Notes: for a free video clip of Sam describing her documentary, go to:

http://mlb.mlb.com/mlb/mediacenter/baseball_discovered/whoswho.jsp; for David Block's longer account of the Bray find, go to his short paper "The Story of William Bray's Diary," *Base Ball*, volume 1 number 2 (Fall 2007), pages 5 -11. To obtain the the documentary itself on iTunes, go to <https://itunes.apple.com/us/tv-season/base-ball-discovered/id385353782>.

Digger News

David Block has found a new reference to English base ball dating to 1749. He notes that it is the first known base ball game involving mature adults. The only earlier references, believed to be printed in the 1744 first edition of the *Little Pretty Pocketbook* and a reported reference to play within the English royal family written by Lady Hervey in 1748, depicted juvenile play. We learn of this fresh find in the June 12 issue of the *Daily Telegraph* in Britain.

Bruce Allardice's paper on the spread of modern base ball in the American south has won a 2013 McFarland Award for the best history or biography for 2012. The article, "The Inauguration of This Noble and Manly Game Among Us," appeared in *Base Ball's* Fall 2012 issue (volume 6, number 2, pages 51-69). Bruce uses extensive newly-found newspaper and other sources to dispel myths about the neglect of base ball by southerners and about the relative importance of northern influences in the spread of modern base ball in the South from 1859 on. One judge wrote: "Here's a very well researched piece that takes on the long-established 'prison camp' theory of dissemination. It represents exactly what we are looking for in an award winner; well written, thoughtful, convincing, and one that makes you wonder why this hadn't been proven before. It breaks new ground and should be cited for a long time to come."

In the winter of 2007, a small band of baseball fans gathered at the fireplace of the home of Richard and **Priscilla Astifan**. The main thing that was kindled that eve was the Rochester Baseball Historical Society. And

this spring, the RBHS sponsored a major 45-day exhibit, *Rochester Baseball: From Mumford's Meadow to Frontier Field*, at Rochester's Central Library. The exhibit featured 22 panels of photographs and traced the path of local baseball from 1825 to the current day.

Larry McCray reports that the next phase of the SABR Origins Committee will be discussed at the SABR Convention in Philadelphia on Saturday, August 3 at 9AM. If you can't make it, and want to contribute or raise issues,, contact Larry or **Bob Tholkes**. Larry feels that a new leader for the Committee will be named soon.

Richard Hershberger continues with his collection of data on as many early base ball clubs as he can find. At this point he has rounded up over 850 clubs that formed prior to the Civil War and that played by New York rules. Richard has generously shared his collection with Protoball, and all of the clubs are entered into the PBall Pre-Pro data base. Richard's quest parallels the effort started in 2008 by Craig Waff to build a directory of early ball games before the War, and we are trying to systematically link clubs and games for PBall users.

John Zinn has discovered an 1855 New Jersey game played among African American clubs, which is four years earlier than we had previously known for African American play of modern base ball. We are in contact with SABR's Negro Leagues Committee to see if John's find now stands as the first ever. Its PBall entry is at <http://protoball.org/1855.36>.

You will find, below, **Debbie Shattuck's** initial *NDPost* offering on the distaff side of ballplaying. She is working to publish her forthcoming thesis on women baseball pioneers with the University of Illinois Press, with a target date of 2015.

Anita Broad is also now listed as a digger. Anita has recently written her Master's thesis, "Stoolball Through the Seasons: It's Just not Cricket," and now serves as Research and Education Officer of Stoolball England. She has already helped Protoball sort out what the English safe-haven games Pentoss (a form of ladies' cricket) and Target Ball were all about. She and her daughter play stoolball, as did her mother and grandmother. She is now working on a grant that funds a primary school education project on the history of stoolball.

Eric Miklich is working on a book on the World Baseball Tour of 1874.

Newly listed as a digger, **Jim Kinnach** heads the Advisory Board of the Ohio Village Muffins Vintage Base Ball Team, which plays by 1860 rules. His main base ball interests include mid-Century ballplaying, Christy Mathewson, and Honus Wagner.

Bill Ryczek has 4 essays on early ballplaying posted at the National Pastime Museum site at <http://www.thenationalpastimemuseum.com/author/william-ryczek/historians-corner>. Included are an account of the Excelsiors' 1860 tour of New York State and an account of the evolution of pitching from the 1850s onward. Access requires you to register for the site, which took just 3 or 4 hours in our recent experience.

Film-maker Ken Burns has enlisted Digger **Tom Heitz** as a presenter on early base ball for a tour group to Cooperstown later this month. The group numbers an unprecedented 160 visitors. Some of us think of Tom as the unofficial Dean of Diggers – he co-wrote the 70- item origins chronology that inspired th Protoball Project-- and we welcome him back.

Jeff Kittel has completely redesigned his “This Game of Games” website at <http://www.thisgameofgames.com/>. Its main focus is regional 19th Century ballplaying, but Jeff’s interests have expanded beyond St. Louis base ball to varieties of ballplaying in America’s trans-Appalachian West. Jeff plans to post his new finds on the site as they turn up.

Deb Shattuck’s New Column: Don’t Forget the Girls

Though we commonly associate baseball with boys and softball with girls, it hasn’t always been that way. We know that women were enthusiastic baseball fans from an early date. The *Spirit of the Times* reported on June 23, 1855 that there were many “ladies” in the crowd that saw the Eagle and Empire Clubs lay at Elysian Fields and that they took “great interest” in the game. Three years later, on July 24, 1858, the paper jokingly reported that the “ladies (God bless them!) turned out in large numbers” and that they “seemed to enter into the spirit of the game in a manner worthy of the most ardent devotee, betting kids and other trifles on the result.”

Women didn’t just attend baseball games; they played baseball and its forerunners too. George Thompson posted an item (#1840.38) to the Protoball site from the *Polynesian* in Hawaii, which reported on December 26, 1840 that “native youth of both sexes engage in the same old games which used to warm our blood not long since.” “Good old bat and ball” was one of the games. Tom Altherr located a fictional story in *The Child’s Friend* (Jan 1848) in which a mother recounts to her son, George, how she “liked boys’ playthings best” when she was a little girl and could “drive hoop, spin top, bat ball, run, jump, and climb” as well as her brothers could. Reports from the Hill Health Center in Dansville, New York in 1858 and 1859 indicate that the “ladies and gentlemen amuse themselves much by ball playing afternoons.”

I suspect that most girls and young women in the 1840s and 1850s got their chance to “bat ball” and play base ball on the grounds of schoolyards or in local pick-up games with boys. In 1859, feminist and abolitionist Frances Dana Barker Gage commented to a newspaper how pleased she was that the girls at the Eagleswood School at Raritan Bay Union (a Utopian community in Perth Amboy, NJ) were “encouraged to take vigorous physical exercise.” Baseball was one of the activities they enjoyed and Gage was determined to see to it that the principal at Dansville NY Seminary would allow his female students to play baseball too. – Deb Shattuck

New On the Protoball Website

[1] *Expansion of Protoball’s “Pre-Pro” Data Base* – Data for about 1600 early games from Craig Waff’s [Games Tabulation 1.0](#) have been linked to the 3500-plus prior entries, so that over 4300 data points for games and clubs are now accessible on the Pre-Pro pages. We understand that Craig had assembled several hundred more games before his untimely death, and we hope to add them in the future.

[2] *Data Sharing with MLB.com* -- Versions of more Protoball features are now available on MLB.com. Data from the “Pro-Pro” data base on clubs and games and players up to the 1870s, and the summaries of 250 baseball-like games appearing on the Protoball “Glossary of Games” can be found at

http://mlb.mlb.com/memorylab/spread_of_baseball/index.jsp. Periodic updates are planned to keep the two websites in sync.

[3] *“Prominent” chronology entries now near the 1200 mark.* -- The main PBall Chronology now includes nearly 1200 items. There are also scores of lesser (“peripheral”) entries, including for example over 120 Civil War entries that are not shown on the Main Chronology. A shorter list, of about 60 Chronology entries classified as “prominent,” is also offered on the chron page.

[4] *Contemporary vs. Retrospective Data*—We have begun to distinguish contemporary data from after-the-fact reports, which historians often treat with less credibility. This will require a lot of re-coding of existing entries, and that will be a gradual process.

[5] *Early Base Ball Championships; An Initial Compilation*—The practice of declaring local or regional champions began early in the rise of modern base ball, and the first crowned champs we now know of were the Live Oaks Club of Rochester, as declared in 1858. We list 38 early championships at http://protoball.org/Early_Championships, but we haven’t really looked hard yet. If you know of others, contact Larry McCray.

[6] *Larry’s Most Wanted Elusive Facts* -- What is the quality of evidence that posts were really used in pre-modern US baserunning games? The 1858 Dedham rules specified posts ; but is there good contemporary evidence, or in accounts of “throwback” games after 1850, that stakes were used widely in predecessor games?

[*From the April Issue Most Wanted – Thanks for data from Jeffrey Kittel and John Thorn: There appears to be no firm evidence that the modern game reached Chicago in 1856, which would make the city one of the first adopters outside of the Greater New York area.*]

[7] *Using search logics on Protoball – A Tip from web-wizard Dave Anderson.* – Protoball supports several kinds of specialized searches of the site or of its sub-parts. Some examples:

find all chronology entries for Minnesota

include refs to base ball but exclude wicket refs

restrict a search to items from the years from 1845 to 1854

find entries where the term “base ball” is in proximity to the word “stolen”

Dave has included a template with 9 varied examples of multifactor searches. To see it, click on “Enhanced Search” on the left-column menu on any Protoball page. Tell us if you have other search needs that we should explore.

Bob Tholkes' Recaps of Recent 19CBB Discussions

On the 19CBB list-serve, April to June 2013

[] *Another base ball court.* Bob Tholkes posted an 1860 note about a base ball practice facility operator in Paterson, N.J.; the only previous notes about such places are in Manhattan.][

[] *Advice to players accepting compensation-* 1858. Bob Tholkes posted the discovery of a *New York Sunday Mercury* note indicating that compensation to players in the form of waived membership dues existed by 1857. John Thorn and Richard Hershberger added comments and information.

[] *Dispute over what rules to use in Boston-* Richard Hershberger posted a series of 1857 Boston newspaper notes in which two clubs argue over rules to be used in an upcoming match.

[] *They made them tough in those days-* Richard Hershberger posted an 1858 note about a player who kept playing after injuring his finger-- which later required amputation.

[] *Schoolboy essay "Ball Playing" 1856-* Richard Hershberger posted a find, inviting discussion of the discussion of the description of ball play.

-- Bob Tholkes

Ryczek Interview, Concluded

Protoball: What strike you as some of the more underappreciated works on early base ball?

Bill Ryczek: Most of works I like are pretty well known. One of my favorite books on early baseball is *Catcher* by Peter Morris. Since Peter is a winner of the Henry Chadwick Award and several other honors I don't think we can call him underappreciated, but I think *Catcher* is based upon a unique theme, and very well done. It's unusual for someone to have the ability to focus on minute detail, like Peter does with his genealogical research, and also be able to structure a work thematically and write riveting prose.

Protoball: You evidently juggled *Baseball's First Inning* along with new books on the 1960s Mets, Yankees, and the Jets of the NFL. Would you advise that sort of mix to others? And what was it like getting to know your New York baseball heroes up close?

Bill Ryczek: It's a function of personality. Some people work best while focusing on a single task while others get bored doing that and become refreshed by changing tasks frequently. I'm the latter type, and if I were a child today, I'm sure I would be diagnosed with some type of disorder. I can only focus on a single thing for a short period of time, and generally work on several projects simultaneously. I also get distracted by peripheral areas of research and spent far more time on subjects like boxing and canine sports than I needed to for *Baseball's First Inning*.

Getting to talk to the heroes of my childhood was wonderful, something I never expected to do when I watched them play. When, as a nine-year-old, I watched Willie McCovey line out to Bobby Richardson to end the 1962 World Series, I never dreamed that 40 years later I'd be talking to Ralph Terry about what he was thinking on the mound, or with Tom Tresh about how he'd made that great catch in left field, or what Phil Linz, Bud Daley and Jack Reed were thinking about as they watched. None of my interaction with them went beyond a phone conversation, but I did become friends with a couple of the old New York Titans, which was a nice, unexpected benefit.

Protoball: What's next for you now? A rest, maybe?

Bill Ryczek: As a co-editor, I'm currently reviewing the final proofs of *Baseball Pioneers*, the pre-1870 history of the teams and players from the areas where baseball began. I'm finishing up a book on minor league football in Connecticut during the 1960s and early '70s, which is due at the publisher next May. Local minor league football is a challenging topic, and I'm trying very hard to tell a compelling story of players struggling to make it to the NFL and owners trying to stave off bankruptcy to make it an interesting read. Following that, I've been slowly working on a book about baseball's 1884 season, and have a partially finished manuscript called *Baseball on the Brink*, the story of baseball in the late 1960s. I think Tim Wendel just wrote my book, however, so I'll wait awhile before reviving that one. I also have a couple of other ideas in the very, very early stages. I'm writing a monthly column on 19th century baseball for The National Pastime Museum website and beginning in January 2014 will teach a course at Quinnipiac University on the history and social impact of baseball. At some point I'd like to write a non-sports book, but that will probably have to wait until I retire, since I still work full-time at my finance company. I doubt I will write any more about the origins of baseball, as I've said about all I have to say, and others are doing a wonderful job of learning more about the game's beginnings without my help.

Protoball: "Rye-sick" or "Rizzick?"

Bill Ryczek: . It depends upon which Ryczek you ask. I pronounce it Rye-zick. My late father and one of my sisters preferred Rye-sick. Our cousins in Moodus, CT say Ritz-zack. In fact, we're all incorrect, for in Polish "cz" is pronounced as we pronounce "ch" in English.

