SPECIAL EDITION

The INSIDE GAME

The Official Newsletter of SABR's Deadball Era Committee

Vol. 8, No. 4: "Let's get this lumpy, licorice-stained ball rolling!"

Special Merkle Edition, Sept. 23, 2008

Chairman's Column

By **John McMurray**
(deadball@sabr.org)

One-hundred years later, the allure of the Merkle game endures. Not only did Fred Merkle's failure to touch second base during a game between the Giants and Cubs have a direct effect on the storied 1908 pennant race, but it also launched decades of debate that will never be resolved definitely. It was the ultimate remarkable game of a remarkable sporting era, where major league baseball as an established institution was still finding its way.

There are many baseball incidents that may be considered the most memorable game or play in baseball history. Yet in most other cases—whether it is Bobby Thomson's "Shot Heard 'Round the World" in 1951 or the ball rolling through Bill Buckner's legs in Game 6 of the 1986 World Series—we know exactly what happened. That is not so here. Even people who were at the game in 1908 disagreed about what really happened decades later. Unlike most sporting achievements, the Merkle game has more to do with cerebral baseball than it does with athletic achievement. The incident will live forever in part because no one will ever really know the whole story. The Merkle game retains its romance from afar.

If the Merkle game were played in the modern era, it would not have the same luster. Through replay, fans would know definitely how Johnny Evers got the ball that he held when he touched second base to force

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Fred Merkle Redivivus

By **Keith Olbermann**

It might have been the very words his name suggested that had gotten me hooked.

"Murky?" The entire event certainly was. Then, because of the holy hell that must have unfolded on that September afternoon so long ago and more recently, because even by the time of this other September afternoon in 1982, the witnesses were probably all gone and only the silent and conflicting pages of history were left to speak.

"Quirk?" Clearly that one was apt to describe how poor Fred Merkle came to be the victim of the nightmare in the first place.

"Pickle?" Obviously the young, talented, unjustifiably-assailed player had gotten himself into one, and one from which, on that 74th anniversary, he still seemed nowhere near extrication. Forces, powerful and insistent, had put him there in one of history's vises, and they were determined to keep him there.

I had already done five anniversary pieces on Merkle, and the story was such

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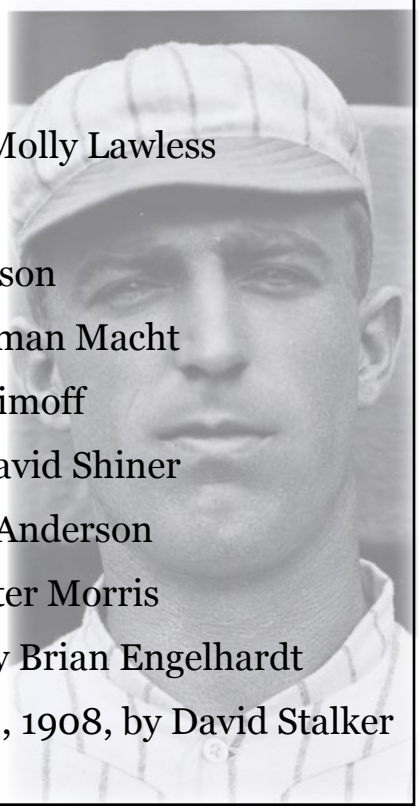

A False Start: Merkle's Professional Debut

By **Craig Lammers** (smokejustis@yahoo.com)

Fred Merkle joined the Giants after being purchased from Tecumseh of the Southern Michigan League late in the 1907 season. Tecumseh wasn't the start of Merkle's career, and if one report is to be believed, he almost ended up in the American League. During his high school days in Toledo, Ohio, Merkle was best known for his football skills. He played just a single season of high school baseball, but attracted notice from college and professional teams. In January of 1906, a newspaper report stated that he had received an offer from Jake Stahl to sign with Washington. Stahl had reportedly been tipped off by a friend at the University of Michigan. The offer was rescinded or refused and Merkle did not join the major league team. That June, he would enter professional baseball.

The Class C Ohio-Pennsylvania League was in its first full season under National Association membership, and the Newark, Ohio team was firmly in the second division. Newark's first baseman Bill Bottenus was a veteran of nearly twenty professional seasons. In early June, he requested and received his release, returning to his home in Buffalo, New York. Newark also needed a second baseman and signed Toledo native Bill Reagan who at the time was playing semipro ball in Chicago Junction (now Willard), Ohio. With Newark using a catcher at first base, Reagan soon recommended Fred Merkle to Newark manager Pete Sommers. Merkle joined the Molders for a home game with New Castle on Sunday June 10.

Pitching for New Castle was former Detroit Tiger Herb Jackson. The game was a classic pitcher's duel between Jackson and Newark's Joe Locke. Newark managed just three hits off Jackson but scored a pair of runs in the third to win 2-1. Merkle (who's last name was spelled Markle in the box score) was overmatched, going 0 for 4 against Jackson. He wasn't alone. Jackson tied the league record by throwing fifteen strikeouts. The only comment on Merkle's play that afternoon was a mention that he had been pulled off first base due to a weak throw by the Newark shortstop.

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The next afternoon, Fred Merkle got his first professional hit against Rube Bowers of New Castle. He also made an error in a 7-6 win that was described "as one of the longest games of the season and lasted but eight and one half innings at that." The time of the long game was two hours and ten minutes.

The next afternoon, first place Youngstown arrived for a series. The first game on Wednesday, June 13 would be Merkle's last game in the O-P League. The fourth inning that afternoon may have been his undoing. In the top of that inning, he was slow leaving first base, allowing Youngstown's Mert Whitney to reach on a bunt. After walking in the bottom half of the inning, he was thrown out trying to steal by catcher Lee Fohl. Merkle was hit by a pitch and scored a run in the sixth.

It rained the next day, and Sommers used the opportunity to shake up his roster. Ed Schlatter, a minor league journeyman, was purchased from New Castle and Fred Merkle was released. Reagan was soon let go, and both players received opportunities in the Southern Michigan League. The *Newark Advocate* said Merkle "made a long distance hitting record on every ground in the Southern Michigan League. Time and again the Toledo lad has broken up games with his mighty stick, and has batted homers over fences that the fans thought could never be reached. At one time or another this summer 'Merk' has made the longest hits ever recorded on the parks in each city."

The next season his success in Tecumseh continued. Reagan described a key Merkle home run. "In the last game we played there this season, we had them beaten 3-0 up to the ninth. With the bases loaded, two out and the count standing 3 and 2 on Merkle, our pitcher handed him a nice fast one. The big fellow swung and when we last saw the ball it was time to pack up the bats."

Meanwhile in Newark, Sommers was soon out as manager, returning to his home in Cleveland. He died in July of 1908. Merkle wasn't the only future major leaguer released by Newark in 1906. The team also dropped outfielder Del Drake. Another O-P team, Lancaster (Ohio) released another Giant Deadball Era standout in 1906. Rube Marquard was dropped after a spectacularly unsuccessful early season relief appearance against New Castle.

The next time Merkle played in an O-P ballpark, the results would be just as painful; this time literally. In June of 1913, the Giants played an exhibition game at Zanesville. With the Giants leading 5-4 in the eighth, Merkle attempted to assault umpire Frank Newhouse after disputing a close play at first base. "Newhouse smashed the New York first baseman over the head with his mask and brought blood from the gash. Newhouse ordered Merkle from the game, but he refused to go. The umpire then forfeited the game to Zanesville." At the time of the incident, Zanesville was playing in the Interstate League, essentially a reconstituted version of the Ohio Pennsylvania League. The Interstate folded about a month after the game.

Sources

Newark (Ohio) Advocate
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Zanesville, (Ohio) Signal◆

The Real Goat?

By **David Nemec** (philtomney@yahoo.com)

On September 23, 1908, in a game against the Chicago Cubs with the National League pennant hinging on the outcome, New York Giants manager John McGraw chose Merkle to replace regular first sacker Fred Tenney, who was idled by an ailing back. Then in just his second season with the Giants, Merkle rarely played but was privileged to sit on the bench beside McGraw, reputedly one of the keenest minds in the game.

With the score tied in the bottom of the ninth and two outs, the Giants had Moose McCormick on third base and Merkle on first. Al Bridwell then shot a single to center, sending McCormick home with the winning run. Upon seeing that Bridwell's hit would plate McCormick, Merkle started toward the Giants clubhouse in center field, believing he had no further role in events. But when Cubs second baseman Johnny Evers began clamoring for the ball, Merkle got a sinking feeling that perhaps he had exited the stage too early.

What happened next will forever be contested. New York sportswriters at the Polo Grounds that afternoon swore that Merkle made for second base at that point and got there ahead of the throw to Evers, and even if he had not beaten it, the ball Evers was fed was not the one that was in play anyway but another ball that was substituted. The game ball, according to some witnesses, somehow wound up in the possession of Giants pitcher Joe McGinnity, who flung it into the leftfield bleachers. Chicago correspondents, on the other hand, swore that Rube Kroh, a seldom-used Cubs pitcher, wrestled the game ball away from McGinnity and flipped it to Evers long before Merkle arrived at the second base bag. In any event, base umpire Bob Emslie claimed the crowd that had flooded onto the field after Bridwell's hit seemingly won the game blocked him from seeing the play at second, and the onus for making a decision fell on plate umpire Hank O'Day. After a lengthy delay, O'Day emerged from a conference with Emslie to rule that Merkle had been forced out at second and the game was still tied. Since it was impossible to clear the spectators off the field so the contest could continue, Cubs manager Frank Chance demanded a forfeit victory, but it went into the books as a draw.

When the Giants and the Cubs finished the season deadlocked, the tie game had to be replayed. Three Finger Brown won the makeup contest for Chicago in relief, outdueling Christy Mathewson, and the Cubs went on to best Detroit in the World Series and earn their last World Championship to date.

Merkle's failure to touch second haunted him for the rest of his life, but the real goat should have been John McGraw. The 19-year-old Merkle was only following a lax custom—runners as late as 1908 often did not bother to touch the next base on a "Sudden Death" hit. But on September 4, some three weeks before Merkle's boner, Johnny Evers had endeavored to have Warren Gill of the Pittsburgh Pirates called out by O'Day on a nearly identical play. O'Day demurred at the time but later that night, after debating the issue with Evers in a Pittsburgh hotel lobby, he realized that Evers had a valid argument. Since the Gill incident was widely reported, it ought to have been incumbent upon McGraw to remind his players of what Evers had tried to engineer against the Pirates, particularly when a repeat attempt was an imminent possibility with two out in the ninth and Giants runners at the corners.

Strangely, both the history of the problematic custom Merkle was following and documentation of successful attempts previous to Evers's to frustrate it have thus far eluded researchers. Though Evers today is considered to have been an ingenious groundbreaker, there were other efforts at the major league level prior to the Gill incident to have a runner who neglected to touch a base as required by rule called out after an apparent "Sudden Death" hit. But for a parallel to events at the Polo Grounds on September 23, 1908, one must scour minor league history to find a documented episode in which an umpire declared a runner on first forced out for failing to touch second after the supposed winning run crossed the plate.

In a Western League game at Indianapolis on June 11, 1899, St. Paul pitcher Chauncey Fisher, after squandering an 11-5 lead, found himself trailing the Hoosiers 12-11 in the bottom of the ninth inning. Facing Doc Newton, Fisher singled to bring home teammate Frank Shugart with the tying run and move his catcher, Harry Spies, to third base. Eddie Burke then lined a single to George Hogriever in center field to plate Spies with the apparent winning run. Before running to second base, however, Fisher stopped to congratulate Burke for his hit, and Hogriever immediately sprinted to second and appealed to umpire Al Manassau. Manassau ruled Fisher forced out at second and disallowed the winning run but not until the crowd had streamed on the field and players from both teams had left the diamond, believing St Paul had won the game. When Manassau could not clear the field, the final score was ruled to be 12-12.

Manassau's decision was subsequently protested by St. Paul manager Charlie Comiskey, but one Briggs, *The Sporting News* St. Paul correspondent who witnessed the game, said Fisher's maneuver "was a chump play and I think there is no doubt but what the umpire's decision will be upheld." Given the fact that *The Sporting News* in that era was read from cover to cover by players, managers, umpires and fans at every level of the game, one can only marvel more than a century later how nine more years could have elapsed before a similar play and ruling occurred in a major league contest.◆

Who's to Blame?

By **Cindy Thomson** (cindy@cindyswriting.com)

Those familiar with the Merkle game of September 23, 1908, are probably also familiar with the Gill game of September 4, 1908. That game, between two teams at the time tied for second place, Pittsburgh and Chicago, set the stage for the Merkle incident.

Before Fred Merkle failed to touch second in a game-ending play, Warren Gill failed to touch second in a similar situation and the Cubs second baseman Johnny Evers complained, saying that Gill was forced out nullifying the game-winning run. Evers was correct, according to the rules. But convention at the time had allowed runs to count in such instances while assuming that all runners who were forced to advance had touched the bases they were heading toward. But usually the runners didn't touch base, turning for the clubhouse instead. After all, the game was over.

On September 4, Johnny Evers decided to give convention a push. He didn't get his way. Umpire Hank O'Day may have ruled that the runner had, by the time Evers got the ball, already crossed the plate. Or he may have said he didn't see the play. He probably didn't see it. No one, up until that point, ever called such plays it seems. There was no reason that O'Day would have been checking to see that the runner was safe. Most games at that time were officiated by only one umpire, and assumingly many calls were missed. That seemed to be the underlying reason for bringing attention to this play on September 4. Cubs owner Charles Murphy's chief complaint in the Cubs protest over the result seemed be related to the lack of umpires covering the games. The Cubs lost the game and sank to third place. But most importantly, attention had been brought to the fact that this particular play was not being called according to the rules. Evers and the Cubs would not forget that. Neither would O'Day. Both were ready when the situation next presented itself, and unfortunately for Fred Merkle and the New York Giants, they would be made example of on September 23.

The question that arises is why no one else was ready for this new enforcement of Rule 59, and especially why were the savvy Giants, headed by the fierce competitor John McGraw, not expecting the Cubs to try to enforce the rule? But before bashing the Giants or the National League commissioners for failing to prevent the circumstances that would haunt poor Fred Merkle for the rest of his life, consider the role the media played in the game.

There were many rivalries in those days, making the Deadball Era a fascinating time period to study. The Chicago Cubs and the New York Giants were two of the greatest rivalries in the National League, even before the playoff game of October 8, 1908 would ensure that position in history. The newspapers, the only media in those days, loved rivalries; they sold newspapers. Perhaps no other match up provided as much potential financial gain as the New York Giants and the Chicago Cubs, both in ticket sales and newspaper revenue. Regional pride was fueled not only by the papers contrasting the differences between the Cubs


Umpire Who Had Courage to Defy New York Crowd.

"HANK" O'DAY.

and Giants, but also by the differences that existed in the two cities. New York was touted as educated and influential. Chicago was the workingman's town. The Giants had their good looking, college-educated pitching ace: Christy Mathewson. Chicago countered with an ace that in some ways represented the common man: the former coal miner with the deformed hand, Mordecai "Three Finger" Brown. Sportswriters talked up these matches. The fans of each team loved nothing more than to witness a defeat of their most despised opponents. After at least one game the previous season in which Brown and Mathewson faced off, police protection had to be called for the umpires. Up until June 8, 1908, when Mathewson and the Giants defeated Brown and the Cubs, Three Finger had racked up ten straight victories against Matty, and this fact only added fuel to the intense rivalry.

Sam Crane, writing in the *New York Evening Journal*, notes the regional rivalry on, of all days, September 4,

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Scoring the Merkle Play

By **Norman L Macht** (nlm@grandecom.net)

If you had been keeping score at the Polo Grounds on September 23, 1908, how would you have scored the final play?

How did those who were covering the game score it?

The first thing to be aware of is that official scorers were not as we know them today. In the old days, the official scorer was an employee of the home team, maybe the club secretary or even an office boy with no other duties that afternoon. And the official scorer's report was not official; the league office relied upon the version distributed by Associated Press.

It's also important to be aware of the state of the rules at the time. The rule requiring Merkle to touch second on the play in dispute was one of many sections that had been in the rule book for years, but were never or rarely enforced. Some had been written so murkily they could, like acts of Congress, be interpreted six ways from Sunday.

As for the scoring rules: there weren't any. Well, actually, there were, but their interpretation and application varied so widely from one scorer to another, there might as well have been no rules. A stolen base in one game wasn't a stolen base in another, a hit not always a hit, a fielder's choice could be any one of three or four things, a sacrifice, well, you get the idea. Pleas for uniformity went unheeded until well into the next decade.

So when the *Boston Globe* began its game story, "According to the official scorer of the New York National club, the local team won today's game from Chicago at the Polo Grounds by the score of 2 to 1," there wasn't anything official about it.

The scorer didn't care what was going on on the field when the game ended. As far as he was concerned, the Giants won and that was that.

The *Washington Post* in a "special report" that named no source, carried the same conclusion, a 2-1 New York victory.

In both cases the box scores noted two outs when the winning run scored and listed 26 putouts – 3 for Evers – and 15 assists for the Cubs.

W. W. Aulick of the *New York Times* reported the umpires declaring it a tie pending league president Harry Pulliam's ruling. The *Times*' box score showed 27 putouts for the Cubs, giving the additional putout, correctly, to Evers, but still only 15 assists.

Now, since Evers did not make the final putout by catching a fly ball or line drive, somebody had to be credited with an assist. That would be anybody who touched the ball during the play – right?

Everybody agreed that Bridwell's hit went to Hofman in center field and Hofman had thrown it into the infield. But the *Times* box score showed no assists for Hofman.

There was general consensus that when the ball was thrown toward Evers, Joe McGinnity had left the coaching line and was headed for the center field clubhouse when he intercepted it. In the dimming twilight, nobody in the press box could clearly make out who did what at that point, but it was generally conceded that McGinnity wrestled with Tinker and Evers, the ball rolled or was thrown or kicked toward left field (not into or over the grandstand), somebody in a Cubs uniform recovered it and got it back to Evers who touched second base. There was no "different ball" introduced.

Floyd Kroh visits the Polo Grounds two seasons later—still no assist!

The *Chicago Tribune*'s man on the scene, Charles Dryden, who sometimes made things up but was an experienced reporter and the best baseball writer of his time, apparently took the time and initiative to go to the Cubs' dressing room and ask what happened. This was his report:

"The facts in the case gleaned from active participants and survivors are these: Hofman fielded Bridwell's knock and threw to Evers for a force play on the absent Merkle. But McGinnity, who was not in the game, cut in ahead and grabbed the ball before it reached the eager Trojan. Three Cubs landed on the iron man from as many directions at the same time and jolted the ball from his cruel grasp. It rolled among the spectators who had swarmed upon the diamond like an army of starving potato bugs.

"At this thrilling juncture, 'Kid' Kroh, the demon [Cubs] southpaw, swarmed upon the human potato bugs and knocked six of them galley-west. The triumphant Kroh passed the ball to Steinfeldt after cleaning up the gang that had it. Tinker wedged in, and the ball was conveyed to Evers for the force out of Merkle.

"Some say Merkle eventually touched second base [which Merkle claimed he did], but not until he had been forced out by Hofman to McGinnity to six potato bugs, to 'Kid' Kroh to some more Cubs, and the shrieking, triumphant Mr. Evers, the well-known Troy shoe dealer. There have been some complicated plays in baseball, but we do not recall one just like this in a career of years of

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Scoring, Continued from page 6.

monkeying with the national pastime."

Dryden then set about scoring the play. Who touched the ball?

Hofman, obviously. He deserved an assist.

McGinnity, but he wasn't in the game and, besides, he was in the wrong uniform.

Kid Kroh, but the Cubs' twenty-year-old lefthander wasn't in the game either, though he deserved an honorary assist.

Steinfeldt. Kroh said he handed it off to the third baseman. Assist for Steinfeldt.

Tinker, who touched the ball either wrestling for it with McGinnity or on a lateral from Steinfeldt. Assist to Tinker.

Thus Dryden's box score totaled 18 assists, giving one each to Hofman, Steinfeldt, and Tinker. Too liberal, you might say, but more accurate scoring than the rest of the accounts, who gave no assists at all on the play.◆

The score:

NEW YORK	AB	R	BH	TB	PO	A	E
Herzog 2b	3	1	1	1	1	1	0
Bresnahan c.	3	0	0	0	10	0	0
Donlin rf	4	0	1	1	2	0	0
Seymour cf	4	0	1	1	1	0	0
Devlin 3b	4	0	2	2	0	2	0
McCormick lf	3	1	0	0	1	0	0
Merkle 1b	3	0	1	1	10	1	0
Bridwell ss	4	0	1	1	2	3	0
Mathewson p	3	0	0	0	0	2	0
Totals	31	2	7	7	27	9	0

CHICAGO	AB	R	BH	TB	PO	A	E
Hayden rf	4	0	0	0	1	0	0
Evers 2b	4	0	1	1	3	7	0
Schulte lf	4	0	0	0	1	0	0
Chance 1b	4	0	1	1	11	1	0
Steinfeldt 3b	2	0	0	0	1	0	1
Hofman cf	3	0	1	1	0	0	0
Tinker ss	3	1	1	4	8	6	2
Kling c	3	0	1	1	0	1	0
Pfeister p	3	0	0	0	1	0	0
Totals	30	1	5	8	*26	15	3

*Two out when winning run was made.

Innings	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
New York	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1—2
Chicago	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0—1

Home run, Tinker. Sacrifice hits, Steinfeldt Bresnahan. Double plays, Tinker to Chance 2, Evers to Chance, Mathewson to Bridwell to Merkle. Left on bases, New York 7, Chicago 3. First base on balls, off Pfeister 2. First base on errors, New York 2. Hit by pitcher, by Pfeister. Struck out, by Mathewson 9. Umpires, Emslie and O'Day. Time 1h 30m.

Box score from the Boston Globe.

SCORE OF THE CUBS-GIANTS GAME.

CHICAGO.	AB	R	BH	TB	BB	SH	SB	P	A	E
Hayden, rf	4	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1
Evers, 2b	4	0	1	1	0	0	0	4	7	0
Schulte, lf	4	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0
Chance, 1b	3	0	1	1	0	1	0	11	1	0
Steinfeldt, 3b	2	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	1	1
Hofman, cf	3	0	1	1	0	0	0	2	1	0
Tinker, ss	3	1	1	4	0	0	0	3	7	2
Kling, c	3	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	1	0
Pfeister, p	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0
Totals	29	1	5	8	0	2	0	27	18	4

NEW YORK.	AB	R	BH	TB	BB	SH	SB	P	A	E
Herzog, 2b	3	1	1	1	1	0	0	1	1	0
Bresnahan, c	3	0	0	0	0	1	0	11	0	0
Donlin, rf	4	0	1	1	0	0	0	2	0	0
Seymour, cf	4	0	1	1	0	0	0	1	0	0
Devlin, 3b	4	0	2	2	0	0	0	0	2	0
McCormick, lf	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0
Merkle, 1b	3	0	1	1	1	0	0	9	1	0
Bridwell, ss	4	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	3	0
Mathewson, p	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0
Totals	31	1	6	6	2	1	0	27	9	0

CHICAGO	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0—1
NEW YORK	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0—1

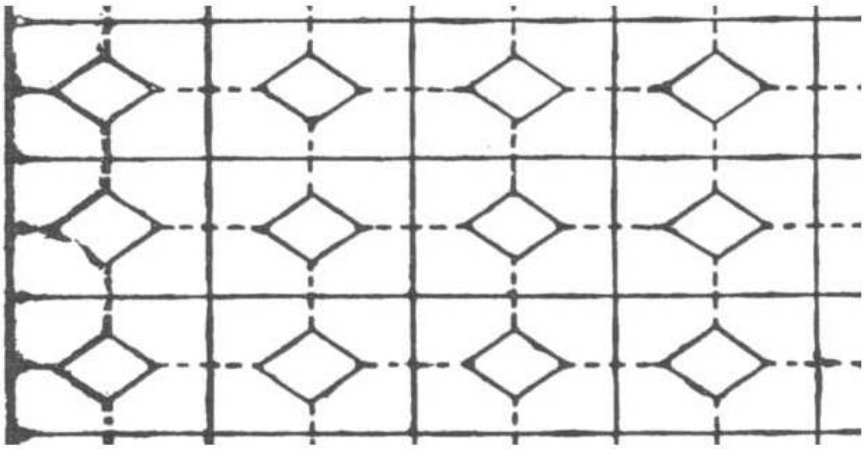
Home run—Tinker. Struck out—By Mathewson, 9. Bases on balls—Off Pfeister, 2. Double plays—Tinker-Chance (2); Evers-Chance; Mathewson-Bridwell-Merkle. Hit by pitcher—McCormick. Time—1:30. Umpires—O'Day and Emslie.

Box score from the Chicago Tribune.

6. McCORMICK,
Left Field

7. MERKLE,
First Base

8. BRIDWELL,
Short Stop



Game of the Century: Cubs at Giants, October 8, 1908

By **Mark Fimoff** (bmarlowe@comcast.net)

Keeping Priorities Straight

With the nation focused on the upcoming November 1908 presidential election, the October 9, 1908 Washington Times headline—"Millions Neglect Daily Duties to Await Returns"—appeared to be a month early. But it wasn't the Taft vs. Bryan election returns the millions were anticipating. It was Chance vs. McGraw. At least for that day, the upcoming election was relegated to second place in the contest for public attention.

Yes, the Merkle game would be replayed to decide the 1908 NL pennant. The home cities of the two clubs maintained the expected high level of preoccupation. In Chicago, "The baseball score… equaled in popular interest the canvas for the president ….The fever possessed all ages and both sexes…fans massed themselves in Orchestra Hall where the Tribune Baseball Board pictured the plays, a howling, shrieking, ball-mad crowd…" In New York, "All over the city other thousands had been following the game by means of the tickers, telephones, and bulletins. Broadway talked of nothing else…In the exchanges… quotation boards were turned into score boards."[1]

It wasn't just the Big Apple and the Windy City that were so distracted. "In every city and hamlet in the United States that could boast of a telegraph wire, frenzied fandom, worked up to the exploding point by the sensational climax of the N. L. race, hung on the ticker yesterday…Politics and the choosing of the president were of secondary importance."[2]

In Pittsburgh, "Traffic around the newspaper offices…was blocked by crowds watching the bulletin boards."[1] Even smaller and diverse venues such as San Antonio[3] and Oshkosh were clearly infected by the fever. "Fans in Oshkosh were baseball crazy this afternoon…Business was forgotten in many Oshkosh offices while the game was in progress."[4] Journalists described a level of national interest in a single baseball game that was unprecedented at that time.

Take Me Out to the Ball Game

By dawn fans had begun to arrive at the Polo Grounds for the 3:00 P.M. game. The gates were opened at 11:00, and thousands poured in. "At 12:00 the crowd had grown so that the police ordered the gates closed….There were at that time more than 30,000 persons on the grounds."[5] "At 12:45…the last inch of standing and sitting room…had been filled."[6]

Inside the park, hundreds precariously populated the grandstand roof. The 8th Avenue fence was breached, allowing a large throng to climb over the Cubs' dressing room, some falling into barbed wire, others reaching the field.[7] Police had to push the crowd back to maintain enough room on the field for play.

With huge crowds surrounding the grounds and the gates closed, many with tickets were locked out. VIP Albert Spalding and friends, holding tickets supplied by Giant's owner John Brush, were among them. They arrived ninety minutes early, but despite their status and their tickets, the police refused to open the gates. The group was later able to sneak in when the gates were briefly opened for an ambulance – just in time for the third inning Cubs rally.[8]

The elevated trains continued to bring in thousands who could not possibly get near the grounds.[6] The overflow moved into the areas around the ballpark, populating Coogan's Bluff and the elevated train structure surrounding the field, where fans could at least get partial views of the game. Some were seated upon the roofs of stopped trains, losing their "great view" when the trains pulled away, to the great amusement of the thousands below.

"By 2 o'clock Coogan's Bluff was loaded…with tens of thousands stretched…from Jumiel Mansion to 8th Avenue. For nearly a mile there was a mass of people lining stairs, viaducts, streets, Speedways, bluffs, crags, rocks, grass, plots, trees…One man was killed when he fell from the elevated structure…His vacant place was quickly filled."[6]

It's Our Turn

With this atmosphere, even the simplest of usual routines could go awry. A timely George Bain photo shows the Cubs and Giants in a dispute over pre-game BP time.[10]

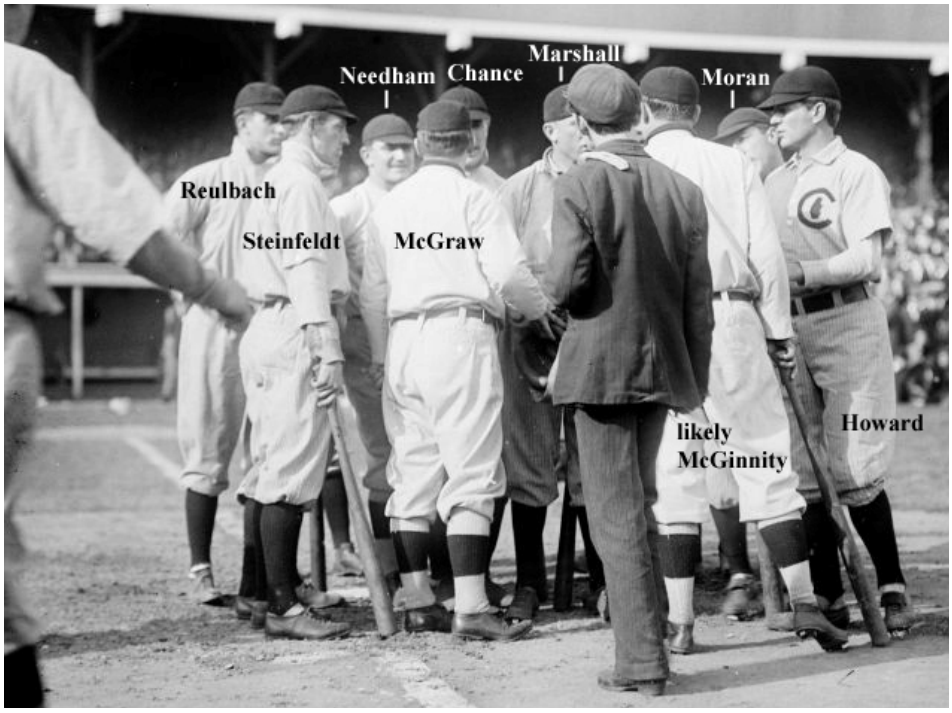
The Giants had completed their full batting practice. The Cubs were but five minutes into theirs when it was decided to advance the start of the game by fifteen minutes. At that point, some of the Giants went to infield positions, and Joe McGinnity went to the plate to hit out balls for fielding practice, where he ran up against Chance. Two teams trying to occupy the same space could have been explosive. What followed depends on the longitude of the newspaper that gave the account.

Continued on page 9.

Game of the Century, continued from page 8.

Readers in Des Moines saw: "Chance is Attacked…the crowd cheered this brutal assault"[11] and "Chance is Assaulted by McGinnity."[12] In Lacrosse they read: "The Giants strove to incite riot."[13] However, the New York Sun downplayed the situation, and gave full credit to McGraw: "…before the thing had gone far McGraw's restraining and compelling hand had broken up the group…"[7]

While there were briefly ten angry players and five bats occupying a very small area, apparently no real harm was done. In the end, the Cubs simply gave way.



The great debate of 1908[10]

Pricking the Bubble

The game itself was interesting, though less so than everything else that occurred on that day and its prequel. Pfiester started for the Cubs, but Chance pulled him out in the first inning with 1 run in, 2 on and 2 out. Brown succeeded him, striking out Devlin to end the threat. The Cubs got 4 off of Mathewson in the third. That was all they got, and that was all they needed as a Giant rally in the seventh fell short with Brown finishing the game.

Though New Yorkers were stunned, all seemed to agree that the Cubs deserved to win the game, if not the pennant. Facing a hostile crowd and instances of questionable umpiring, "The Chicagos played the better ball - that was the story of their victory in a nutshell."[7]

We Love NY—But Let's Get Outta Here

When the game ended, for the Cubs, getting out was even more thorny than getting in. While leaving the field, they were sometimes congratulated but often assaulted, depending on the temperament of the nearest fan. Several Cubs were hit by fists and missiles, and Frank Chance was struck in the neck by a fan, suffering cartilage damage. There were reports of New York's finest drawing guns to keep fans back as the visitors entered their dressing room.[14,15] Mordecai Brown called it "…as close to a lunatic asylum as anyplace I've ever been."[16]

Death, destruction, insanity, a bit of baseball, and most notably an unprecedented level of local and national interest together provided a fitting "…windup of the greatest season baseball has ever known."[17] And for the Cubs, who went on to an easy World Series triumph over Detroit, it was their game and season of the century.◆

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Slagle to Hofman to Evers: Stability and Transition in the Lineup of the World Champion Cubs

By **David Shiner** (cunegonde@prodigy.net)

As Deadball aficionados know, the "Merkle boner" was preceded by a game between the Cubs and Pirates that featured a similar "blunder" by Buc rookie Warren Gill. Less well known is the fact that the Cubs made a significant personnel move between the Gill and Merkle contests. The Cub center fielder who tossed the ball to Johnny Evers on the disputed play in Pittsburgh was Jimmy Slagle; the man who assisted on the Merkle play was Art ("Solly") Hofman. An exploration of the reasons behind this change of center fielders helps explain the extraordinary success of the Cubs during the Tinker to Evers to Chance era.

The Cubs' starting lineup remained remarkably constant from 1906 through 1910, during which time the Cubs captured four pennants and two World Series while posting the best five-year record in major league history. Manager Frank Chance made few permanent changes to his regulars unless they were physically unable to perform or otherwise absent. Johnny Kling was the catcher; Chance, Evers, Harry Steinfeldt, and Joe Tinker manned the infield spots; and Jimmy Sheckard and Frank "Wildfire" Schulte were the corner outfielders. The switch involving Slagle, the Cubs' regular centerfielder from 1902 until late 1908, and super sub Hofman was a rare exception to Chance's normal practice throughout the Cubs' glory years.

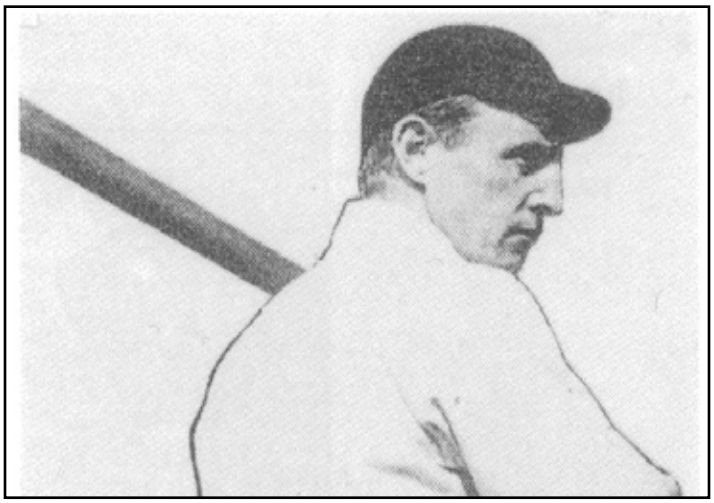
The defending World Champions started the 1908 campaign well before tumbling out of first place in mid-July, then fell further off the pace by playing .500 ball for the next month. Injuries were part of the problem. So was the 35-year-old Slagle, whose decline in all aspects of the game was perceptible. Hofman, nearly ten years younger and far more athletic, saw occasional duty in center. But injuries and illnesses to a number of key players meant that he was often needed elsewhere on the diamond, so Slagle remained the regular center fielder.

On August 16, the Cubs lost 1-0 to the Phillies to tumble six games out of the top spot. Slagle went hitless, dropping his batting average below the "Mendoza line." The next day Chance benched him. With Hofman taking over as leadoff man and center fielder the Cubs went on a tear, winning 16 of their next 19 to close to within two games of the first-place Giants and a half-game of the Bucs.

Hofman twisted a knee in the last game of that stretch, so Slagle was back in center when the Cubs faced the Pirates in Pittsburgh in early September. The two-game series resulted in a split, the first game being the Gill contest. Then the Cubs returned to Chicago, and Hofman returned to the lineup. Slagle moved to left field, replacing the injured Sheckard. He would never start a game in center again. In fact, Chance was reluctant to start him at all, the little man riding the pines whenever the Cubs had three other outfielders available. Ironically, he was now hitting better than he had all season; as a *Chicago Tribune* writer observed in mid-September, his recent hits were "a bit scratchy, but they count in the averages." In fact, he hit over .300 down the stretch. Still, Chance's decision was vindicated by the fact that the Cubs' record without Slagle in the starting lineup that year was a tidy 41-10, but "only" 58-45 when he started.

Slagle remained on the Cubs' roster for the '08 World Series, but he never left the bench. Hofman starred in the Series as the Cubs defeated the Tigers for the second consecutive year. (Ironically, Hofman had also played every game in center in the 1906 Series, when Slagle was injured.) Slagle's major league career was over; Hofman would remain the Cubs' regular center fielder until Chance dealt him to the Pirates during the 1912 season.

Baseball rosters of a century ago were quite stable by historical standards. Frank Chance's rosters were the most stable of all. By and large, the same players started for the Cubs from 1906 through 1910. One of the few exceptions was the transition from Jimmy Slagle to Solly Hofman during one of the greatest pennant races of all time.◆



Jimmy Slagle

Solly Hofman

The Scandals of 1908

By **David Anderson** (danderson46@comcast.net)

The 1919 World Series will always be associated with gambling. It forced Major League Baseball to come to grips with the issue. No matter what you can say, Judge Kenesaw Mountain Landis' harsh policy saved the integrity of baseball and the future of the sport.

Viewed in any context, the investigation of the attempted bribery of umpires in 1908 to fix the Cubs-Giants play-off game was a farce. It was a successful cover-up. Coming at the close of the season, preserving the status quo was more important than getting to the truth that gambling and bribery was a red-hot issue.

1908 was a successful season both on and off the field. On the field the fans were treated to two pennant races, which held the fans' excitement from beginning to end. Baseball officialdom had been campaigning for years to boost baseball as the national pastime. 1908 showed everyone that baseball was the national game and it would remain that way until Professional Football became dominant in the 1960's.

Look at what happened during the 1909 season. First, two stadiums Forbes Field and Shibe Park would open for play in 1909. Many other owners, including Charles Comiskey, would begin plans to open new ballparks within the next few years. Any hint of scandal could destroy those plans.

The problem was there was dirty laundry, despite repeated efforts by owners to stamp out gambling. The status quo had to be protected and it was grounded into a philosophy of not tolerating any outside scrutiny, either governmental or journalistic. Therefore protecting the status quo was a high stakes gamble. But the owners had to roll the dice. They were 'betting' that the dice were loaded in their favor. They were.

Despite credible eyewitnesses with umpires Bill Klem and James Johnstone the bribery investigation unfolded slowly. National League Secretary John Heydler had early knowledge of the case. On October 7th, both Klem and Johnstone told Heydler of two separate attempts to bribe them. Both attempts were intended to give the Giants the game. News of the attempted bribes leaked out very slowly because it was insider, not public, knowledge.

By mid-December heat was building about the bribes. Prior to that, league officials were involved in a controversy over scalping tickets to the 1908 World Series in Chicago. The Cubs management was censured for lax business methods and they had no ties to funneling tickets to speculators.

National League President appointed a committee to investigate the bribes. Giant owner John T. Brush was named head of the committee. Pulliam joined the committee with Brooklyn owner Charles Ebbets and Cincinnati owner and National Commission president Garry Herrmann.

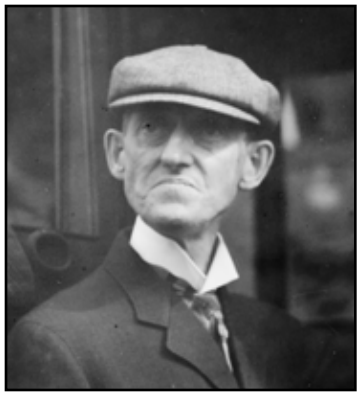
Prior to naming the committee, Pulliam said the bribery did not involve anyone involved with organized baseball. The Cubs management was outraged at who was on the committee, but did nothing to state their point. They were still smarting from the scalping probe and besides the status quo needed to be maintained.

Brush's appointment seemed strange at the time and when the facts came out it was to say the least, outrageous. For Pulliam, it may have been a sign of his eventual breakdown and in 1909 his suicide. For Brush it was a chance to question the facts and with it making sure the outcome would never be resolved to anyone's satisfaction.

According to National League owners they had an open and shut case. Referring to statements by Klem and Johnstone, "In one of the statements the name of the person who approached the umpire was given as well as the names of the persons he claimed to represent. In the other statement the names of the persons who approached the umpire were not given, this umpire stating that they were strangers to him."

It was Bill Klem who referred to a person he knew. But when he gave an interview in 1951 he did not name the perpetrator, a change from his initial affidavit, in which

Continued on page 12.



John Brush

Charles Ebbets Sr.

Scandals of 1908, cont. from page 11.

a man who Klem had known for some time was trying to bribe him. The man was Dr. Joseph M. Creamer, the Giants team physician.

Klem's account of the bribery is fascinating; especially since many of the people involved in the case were dead by the time he gave his interview in 1951. He noted that, "I will go to my grave wondering where the money came from. It certainly was not from Tammany Hall, because they didn't care ten dollars worth. And certainly he himself had neither the bank account nor the property to raise any large sum." The obvious people that may have tried to raise the money were Giants players. Did they pass the hat to outsiders, or did McGraw, Donlin, Mathewson, Bresnahan and others get the money together. We shall never know.

We do know that Dr. Creamer was the man who tried to bribe Klem. Klem said so, saying the man who tried to bribe him was banned from ever entering any major league ballpark. On April 24 and 25, *Chicago Tribune* reporter Harvey T. Woodruff revealed Dr. Creamer's identity. His enterprise was not rewarded. By then the 1909 season had begun and the story did have any legs.

However, nothing came from the investigation, other than Creamer's ban from major league ballparks. Brush was active in killing the probe. He consulted attorneys who said no crime had been committed under New York law. Their statement said as much as it did not say, "Attempted bribery…is a criminal offense only when an effort is made to influence public officials by the use of money. As the umpires were not public officials, but employees of a private corporation, the attempt to bribe them cannot be rated as a crime."

As for Dr. Creamer and Woodruff's story, let them have the last say. Woodruff wrote, "Those who profess to know say that the affidavit of Umpire Klem stated that the man who approached him the umpire said he was acting on behalf of three New York players, and these names are understood to have been mentioned in the affidavit, but the investigating committee of the National League could find nothing to substantiate the charges."

In Klem's affidavit it said, "a man named Dr. Creamer, official physician of the Giants, met Klem under the grand stand at the polo grounds, holding a $2,500 dollars…it is yours if you will give all the close decisions to the Giants and see that they win sure. You know who is behind me and you needn't be afraid of anything. You will have a good job the rest of your life."

Klem also declared that Dr. Creamer mentioned the name of a well-known politician who Klem claimed, "does not know Creamer except in a casual way."

You can read the full account in *More than Merkle*, the book I wrote in 2000. Dr. Creamer died in 1918. Brush would die in 1912. McGraw and Klem went on to Hall of Fame careers. Baseball would face its problem with gambling after the Black Sox scandal in 1920.◆

Fred Merkle Strikes Back

By **Peter Morris** (moxbib@comcast.net)

Much of the appeal of the conventional version of the story of "Merkle's Boner" is that it presents us with two instantaneously recognizable archetypes. In one corner is the feckless and naive rookie Fred Merkle and in the other is the crafty veteran Johnny Evers. When fate dictates that the paths of the two men cross, the result is inevitable – the neophyte falls victim to the wily elder statesman.

Such a narrative, of course, has little real suspense. Yet for many that is precisely what makes such a story satisfying – it justifies our preconceived notions rather than challenging them. We have the pleasure of getting to the end and proclaiming: "I knew that was going to happen!"

This is, I believe, the key to what we recall and to what we have forgotten about Fred Merkle and Johnny Evers. Over the years, many commentators have sought to mitigate or exonerate Merkle for his fateful failure to touch second base. But their efforts have largely been in vain. Rituals with familiar protagonists and predictable outcomes capture our imaginations; complex, nuanced situations with loose ends are harder to make sense of and we choose to forget or ignore them. So it is that "Merkle's Boner" remains part of baseball lore while the day when Merkle struck back at Evers has been forgotten.

Merkle made his stab at getting even during the first game of a double-header at the Polo Grounds on September

Continued on page 13.

Johnny Evers at the Polo Grounds, 1910
from the Library of Congress, George Grantham Bain Collection

Merkle Strikes Back continued from page 12.

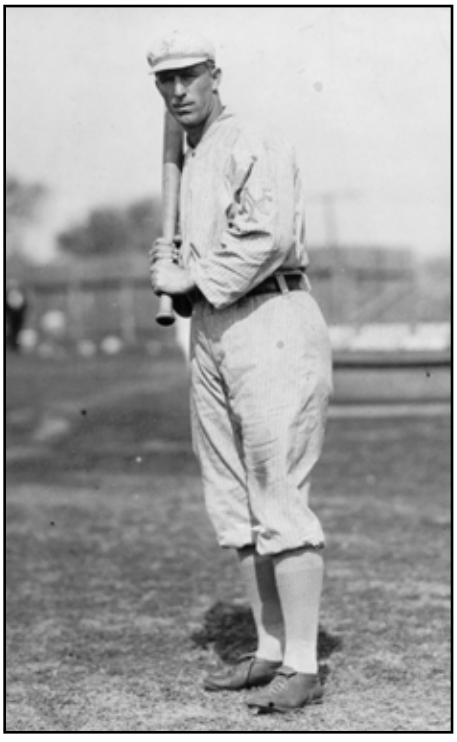
22, 1910. His old nemesis led off the fifth inning by drawing a walk. Giants' pitcher Louis Drucke had made a toss to Merkle in an unsuccessful attempt to catch Evers napping. And then the unthinkable happened.

Fred Merkle faked throwing the ball back to Drucke but instead held on to it. There was nothing novel or original about this ploy – indeed *Chicago Tribune* reporter I. E. Sanborn pointed out that this was a "time worn" trick and declared that he had been seen it attempted for nearly two decades without ever having seen it succeed. Yet Evers fell for it and blithely stepped off the base!

Merkle alertly applied the tag to the embarrassed Evers and the umpire signaled the out. As the *New York Sun* put it the next day, the delighted Polo Grounds crowd "stood up and roared" and indulged in "a big laugh at [Evers's] expense." A *Sporting Life* correspondent would add, "Nothing pleases the Giants more than to put one over on Evers, and it is so seldom they get the chance that there is a big celebration when they do slip one over." Fred Merkle had finally gotten his revenge.

Or had he? In the days to come it became clear that Merkle's revenge on his erstwhile tormentor would meet a fate that he would never happen to his infamous "boner" – it would be quickly forgotten. What had happened?

There is, of course, one obvious explanation. Merkle's hidden-ball trick lacked the drama of the original play, since the Cubs boasted an all-but-insurmountable twelve-game lead in the 1910 pennant race. Worse, the play didn't end up making any real difference as the Cubs won the game 5-1.



Fred Merkle from the Library of Congress, George Grantham Bain Collection

Yet this explanation is not entirely convincing. Granting that Merkle's revenge occurred under far less noteworthy circumstances, didn't it deserve to be remembered as – at the very least – an interesting footnote? Moreover, although the now-forgotten second act did have some striking parallels to its historic precursor – it featured the same two main figures, took place on the same playing field and even on the same strip of ground, and occurred almost exactly two years to the day after the original game.

I. E. Sanborn of the *Chicago Tribune* noticed the symmetry. "A feature of the game," he observed in his summary the next day, "occurred in the first game when J. Evers was made the victim of a mothball scented trick by none other than Fred Bonehead Merkle ... Was there great joy among the bugs who dearly love the Trojan, we don't think so? What made it all the more noteworthy is that tomorrow is the anniversary of 'Merkle day' at the Polo grounds. Just two years ago tomorrow Merkle gave Chicago it's [sic] third pennant by forgetting to touch second."

Others might have been expected to give the play at least as much attention, especially members of the New York press. After all, isn't it one of the basic tenets of journalism that a reversal of fortune is newsworthy? And when a player as shrewd as Johnny Evers falls for a "mothball scented trick," shouldn't that make for a classic "man bites dog" kind of story?

But few saw it that way. The *New York Sun* devoted five sentences to the hidden-ball trick, while neither the *New York Times* nor the *New York World* mentioned it at all. A *Sporting Life* correspondent described the play briefly, but otherwise the incident was completely ignored by the national press. And so, in the eyes of the world, Fred Merkle hadn't really gotten even a measure of revenge.

The underlying reason for this, I believe, is simple. We like our villains to always be bad, our heroes to always be admirable, our schemers to always have the last laugh, our fall guys to always be outsmarted, and the Washington Generals to always lose. We become confused if a veteran character actor seeks to become a leading man, or if a vampire bursts into song. Fred Merkle already had a role, and so when he tried to step into a new and very different one, most observers didn't know what to make of it. So his revenge was ignored and forgotten, enabling him to forever remain the embodiment of the hapless fall guy.◆

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And all the books and articles that haven't been written about Fred Merkle playing the hidden-ball trick on Johnny Evers.

Fred Merkle's Adventures with the 1927 Reading Keys

Editor's Note: This article was originally published in a longer version in the *Historial Review of Berks County*, Summer 2006, Volume 71, No.3, page 129 and following.

By **Brian C. Engelhardt** (bengelhardt@comcast.net)

"...Moses chosen to lead the Reading Keystones out of the Baseball Wilderness"

When 37 year old Fred Merkle agreed to manage the Reading Keystones of the International League in early March of 1927, it looked like a logical career move. Long respected by his managers as a student of the game, he had served as a player-coach on the Yankees for part of the 1925 season and all of 1926. As Lou Gehrig's backup he didn't see much playing time—13 at bats in 1925 and 2 in 1926. If Merkle wanted to stay in the game, it would now be as a manager.

In taking the position with the Keys Merkle was going to be able to put to good use his knowledge of the International League, having played four and a half seasons with Rochester from 1921 until he took the position with the Yankees during the 1925 season. While at Rochester Merkle apparently learned a lot about the league's pitchers, as he hit above .300 each year, won the league RBI crown 3 times, and was named an all star in 1924. What Merkle was not prepared for was the situation he would inherit with the Keys.

The 1926 Keys were abysmal. Their 31-129 record caused them to finish 75 games out of first place in the eight team league (and for that matter 38 ½ games out of seventh place). Merkle was taking over for his former New York Giants teammate George "Hooks" Wiltse, who had taken the position at mid season when his predecessor simply left town in the dead of night with no explanation. Merkle didn't really need to ask Wiltse about the team he was taking over, as due to the team's financial problems, over the winter the Keys' majority owner William O. Ashton, Sr. sold the contracts of all but two of the team's players.

During the 1926 season the Keys drew only 32,000 fans—down from 160,000 in 1925, and 70,000 less than any other team in the International League that season. Fan support was so poor that Ashton switched the last two home series of the 1926 season to the opposing team's park. With crowds of a few hundred a game, the Keys netted more from their share of gate receipts received on the road than what they would take at home, after expenses.

Ashton and his son William "Billy" Ashton, Jr., secretary to the team, were a blight on the league. They had previously lost money with bad teams in Newark and Providence. At the league's winter meeting Ashton offered to forfeit the Reading franchise to the rest of the league. The other owners turned him down since an 8 team league schedule had been determined and published. Instead, it was decided that each team would loan a few players to the Keys. *The Sporting News* columnist Bunny Morganson wrote: "It is a ten-spot to a plugged buffalo nickel that none of the sympathetic (International League) clubs will let loose anything really worthwhile in their charitable movement towards the Reading club."

When Merkle was hired, *Reading Times* Sports Editor Shandy Hill wrote that Merkle was, "the Moses chosen to lead the Reading Keystones out of the baseball wilderness." It remained to be seen if Merkle would find that dealing with the Ashtons was harder than parting the Red Sea.

"I need pitchers..."

Merkle had barely more that two weeks to assemble a team much less get it ready to play. The Keys were to open spring training in Cape Charles, Virginia on March 20. (At that time a team's manger was in charge of all player transactions in addition to managing the team during games.) When spring training opened he had all of four players in camp. Each day a few of the new "borrowed" players would arrive. Merkle tried to work his contacts with the Giants and the Yankees to get better quality players than the young players that he anticipated receiving from the other teams in the league, which he termed "Class D League level." In particular Merkle focused on pitching, declaring play to play in the International League was "too

continued on page 15.

Merkle, seated at left, with his wife Edith, seated far right, and his oldest two daughters (the two infants in the picture) appear as photographed prior to his time with the Keys. Photo from original article in the Historical Review of Berks County.

Reading Keys, continued from page 14.

fast for youngsters in their first year." He added: "I need pitchers who are able to throw and who know where they're throwing …old hands…pitchers who have been in league",

The holdovers from the 1926 team (whose contracts Ashton had apparently been unable to sell) were pitcher Jack Slappy—with big league experience of 3 games with the 1920 A's—and catcher Dewey Hill, however by the end of the three weeks that amounted to spring training, between players on loan and players he signed independently, Merkle got a roster together. His connections with Yankees resulted in their loaning catcher Vernon "Spud" Davis and outfielder George "Kiddo" Davis (both of whom would eventually have major league careers), plus infielder Hugh Ferrell (who wouldn't).

The Keys opening day roster featured a number of former major leaguers, nearly all of whom were on their career downside. 35 year old Allan Russell, a 'legal spitballer', had pitched for the Yankees, Red Sox and Senators. Outfielder George "Dutch" Maisel, also 35, played briefly with the Browns and the Tigers prior to serving in World War I, then later with the Cubs in 1921 when he hit .338. (He was released the next year when he hit .190). Third baseman Joseph "Goldie" Rapp (named for the gold tooth in front of his mouth), another 35 year old, played with the Giants and the Phillies, (in retrospect the most notable event in his career was in 1921 when he was one of the players traded by the Giants to the Phillies for Casey Stengel). Shortstop Sam "Red" Crane, 33, was a flashy fielder who played with the A's, Senators, Reds and Dodgers over an 8 seasons, but was never able to hold a starting position because of his .208 lifetime average. Outfielder Dave Barbee hit .170 during his brief time with the 1926 A's. The rest of the Keys came chiefly from lower Class "D" leagues—substantiating Merkle's suspicions. On top of everything else, three solid weeks of rain at Camp Charles resulted in the Keys coming north without having played themselves into proper shape.

"Not So Bad"

The Keys opened on a chilly April 13 against Buffalo at Lauer's Park in Reading. Merkle's home run to left center field even gave the Keys an early lead—which would not hold up as the Keys lost 5-3. The game drew a large crowd (reported as 3,000 in the *Reading Eagle*, and 4,000 in the *Times)*. The press was favorable in its review of opening day, as the *Eagle* noted that the Keys out hit Buffalo 12-9 and the "efforts of the 'professional past timers' pleased the crowd" (players were referred to as "past timers" at the time, outfielders as "gardeners"). The box score in the *Eagle* was titled "Not So Bad." After two more losses the Keys achieved a 7-6 victory over Buffalo. The next day, Easter Sunday, Merkle hit two home runs to lead the team to a 3-2 victory over Syracuse before a home crowd that *both* the *Times and* the *Eagle* put at 4,000—larger than any home crowd the year before.

Merkle continued to try to improve the pitching staff, signing veteran John "Mule" Watson, 33, whose experience with the A's, Braves, Pirates and Giants included pitching the opener of the 1923 World Series for the Giants. Merkle used his connections to arrange for the Giants to loan the Keys 30 year old Harry Courtney. Courtney had pitched for the Senators and the White Sox after serving as an ambulance driver in World War I. Merkle also signed local Reading resident pitcher Fred" Lefty" Carts, who had retired from the Keys 1923 when he took a good position at a local bank. A condition of Carts agreeing to play was that he only would pitch in weekend home games. The bank job paid well. Carts did not want his commitment to the Keys to interfere with that.

A few days later Merkle looked to have the antidote to the Keys sickly .221 team batting average when he signed Charles "Chick" Shorten, who carried a lifetime major league average of .275 over parts of 8 seasons with the Red Sox, Tigers, Reds and Browns. Released by Newark (for whom he had hit .332 in 1926) Shorten had been fan favorite in Reading when he played for and managed the Keys in 1925, hitting .339 in 107 games. (That Keys franchise then moved to Newark and was replaced by the franchise owned by the Ashtons). Despite his 35 years, it was clear that Shorten could still hit.

Merkle was winning fans back to the Keys. His .333 average led the team. His continual efforts to improve personnel on the team were reported daily. Home attendances was already at 20,000—two thirds of what it was for the whole 1926 season, despite the team's 3-10 record. The new found fan support was about to be severely tested.

All for One and One for May

On April 25 the Keys defeated Rochester 6-5 in the second game of a doubleheader when Lefty Carts threw six shutout innings in his debut. Allan Russell weathered a 9th inning rally to save the game. It would be the last time the Keys would win a game until they would defeat Baltimore on May 30—their only victory that month. In between the two wins there would be a streak of 31 losses.

The problems that Merkle would have with the Keys performance on the field were nothing compared to the problems he was about to encounter with the Ashtons. On May 4 (by now the Streak was up to 7), without consulting Merkle, Ashton cut payroll by releasing Courtney and Russell, the team's two best pitchers, as well as the newly signed Shorten—who never even suited up. An angry Merkle told the press: "I had nothing to do with the release of those players. It was done over my head." Aside from cutting expenses, Ashton's move depleted a pitching staff that was already hurting for bodies. In a May 8 doubleheader loss to Rochester (the 12-11 and 16-4 losses took the Streak to 12) Jack Noble, who lost both games, was left in the second game even though he had given up 16 runs on 20 hits. Merkle had nobody else to put in and ignored Noble's numerous pleading looks to the bench as he took a pounding on the mound.

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Fred C. Merkle after 9-23-1908

By **David Stalker** (attheballyard@yahoo.com)

Fred Merkle was just in his late teens when he took blame for the New York Giants not making a trip to the 1908 World Series. It robbed him of the joy that any other young man would have experienced putting on a Giants' uniform. If he had only touched second base on September 23, 1908, the Giants' would have advanced to the World Series, not the rival Cubs. Today, Fred would only be remembered for his outstanding career, of which his family would eagerly speak about without any reservations, as would have Fred.

It would have been easy for Fred Merkle to walk away from the game with an intelligent mind and a whole life in front of him. However, he was not a quitter or a bonehead, and he would set out to prove both. By the urging and pay raise from his manager John McGraw, Fred would return for the 1909 season.

Fred came into the 1909 season with his new undeserving name "Bonehead". He struggled at the plate more then ever before, and finished the season with a career low .191 batting average. Considering that he was a lifetime .273 hitter, I have to assume that along with still learning the N.L. pitchers, his blunder was still weighing heavily on him.

The following season McGraw's patience paid off when Fred knocked in 70 runs and batted .292, which was higher than the previous year. He then followed with a long and competitive career.

There are many pictures available of Fred during his playing days, however, it is a difficult task to find any with him expressing happiness. He seemed to have everything else in life that most men could only dream of having. Baseball was never talked about at home. His daughter learned about her dad's base running blunder when she came home from school one day and asked why one of the kids was calling her "Bonehead."

Fred retired from baseball and in 1927 moved to Florida where he lived a good life, enjoying his family and the peaceful surroundings. It was not until 1949, after twenty-two years at his new residence, that he finally started to come out of his shell by attending Daytona Beach Islander home games. A local fan who respected Fred and his friendship stated that Merkle enjoyed talking about his wife and three daughters. "He was a devoted father and a wonderful person," the fan said.

He stayed clear from the MLB spotlight until one day in 1950 when he accepted an invitation from the NY Giants to appear at an old-timers game. By the urging of his daughter he accepted the invitation, but with hesitation. How would the crowd react to him after all those years? Would he once again have to listen to "Bonehead" chants? No! The Giants fans wildly cheered for him. Fred and long-time friend and teammate Larry Doyle did not suit up for the contest, but were honored members.

In an interview in 1955, within one year of his death, he was asked about the play. Fred was quoted as stating the following. "It has never been a pleasant subject for me to discuss. For years while I continued to play, it haunted me and kept me in constant fear of what can happen to me now."

Fred's obituary read, "Bonehead play goes to grave with Fred Merkle." He took his agony to his unmarked grave as he did not want to give anyone a chance to put Bonehead on his stone. Feeling he deserved so much more, I, along with his family, put up a beautiful memorial for him in 2005, in the town of his birth, Watertown, Wisconsin.

To this day his family still suffers from the play. Out of love, and a high level of respect for this man, they feel obligated to prove, just as Fred once did, that he was anything but a "Bonehead." Caution must be taken from those inquiring about Fred Merkle. What is their intent, how much truth do they know, and how sincere are they to look past the deceiving name of "Bonehead"?

Fred's daughter Marianne Kasbaum has recently stated that she is not accepting any more interviews. Remember, baseball was never talked about at her home while she was growing up. There are not any inside secrets to give about the September 23, 1908 play; only memories about an outstanding father.◆

Photo of Merkle gravesite, courrtesy of Stew Thornley.

Merkle Redivivus, continued from page 1.

a cornerstone of the baseball part of my consciousness that I could not say when first I had heard it. But I had never gone to where the Polo Grounds had stood, nor dared to try to convey this saga worthy of Greek mythology to a television audience, when I cajoled my bosses to let me try. "Here," said the assignment editor as she told me the crew would meet me at the scene, and handed me a subway token. "Take the CNN limousine."

The Polo Grounds where Fred Merkle had or hadn't touched second base, had burned to the ground in 1911. A succeeding structure, much larger and certainly more familiar to latter-day fans, had stood until 1964, by which time its original residents were catching colds in the frigid gusts of San Francisco, and its last tenants, the hapless Mets, had relocated to an antiseptic semi-circle in Queens. On this hallowed ground where Manhattan begins to form a point, there now stood a series of bland, nondescript apartment houses that looked more like wildly-growing, off-colored trees, than they did the product of actual architectural *intent*. "My God," I said to myself as I alighted from the 155th Street subway station, "they're *beige*."

More comforting – and to my purpose, more inspiring – were the colors of the geological outcropping that loomed above The Beige. It was Coogan's Bluff, the series of jutting hunks of granite bulging from behind the wild green of grass and trees, which had given the area and, once upon a time, the ballpark a nickname. Atop it was huddled a group of ancient, decrepit, and yet somehow still imposing low-rise apartments whose windows seemed to frown with age and the tragedy of caring maintenance ceased. Still perched at the edge of the cliff as they had been, well before the days of Merkle; wood-and-plaster spectators who had the best seats in the house until the stadium was one day flattened, spectators who now found themselves frozen and mute in their once-choice locations. Those very buildings, looking younger but just as sensate, could be seen, blurry and distant, over Fred Merkle's shoulder in one of the photographs still most-frequently reproduced when it came time to invoke his story and its moral. I had never before seen them at close range, and so at first glance they made me slightly awestruck, as if I were seeing the stone faces of Easter Island.

I had deliberately arrived well ahead of the camera crew to get a feel for the place and map out where I would describe to the camera those parts of Merkle's tale that could not be illustrated by pirated photos. I wandered alone and unmolested for fully a quarter of an hour before I found a bronze plaque at a building's corner—a plaque so forgotten that even the graffiti looked ancient.

"Polo Grounds," read the top line. Then below it:

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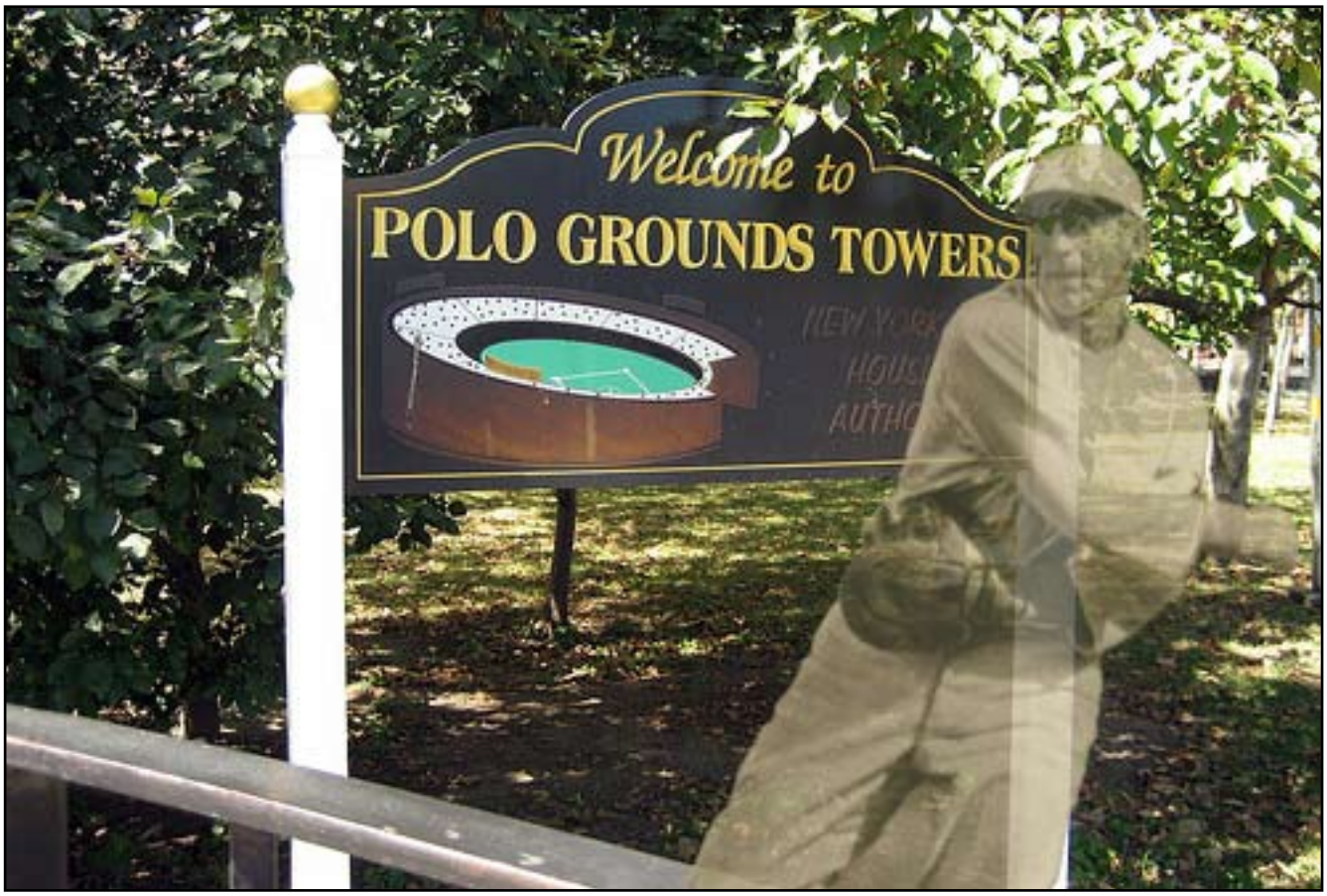

Merkle haunts the former site of the the Polo Grounds. Artwork courtesy of Matt Fulling.

Merkle Redivivus, cont. from page 17.

"Approximate Location." Then a rendering of a baseball diamond. *Then* the resumption of an unfinished sentence: "Of Home Plate." The brief marker made mention of the Giants' championships and the tenancies of the Yankees and then the Mets and for a moment, I couldn't remember ever hearing of the "Mets" before. When the lapse passed after no more than a few seconds, I laughed out loud at my forgetfulness, and I wondered if, at 23, I had already begun my quick slide into the gooey depths of senility.

I was a pedestrian archaeologist, but my excitement was that of a professional. I had a sense of re-discovery as I estimated the angles from which the first and third base lines should have extended, and as I began to walk down the former to the approximate distance of ninety feet.

"I stepped in the batter's box, and as I was getting set I saw Merkle edging pretty far off first base, almost as though he was going to try to steal. That didn't make any sense, so I stepped out of the box and looked at him and he went back and stood on the bag." The words were Al Bridwell's, spoken to baseball's most faithful chronicle, Larry Ritter, nearly sixty years after his base hit turned the key on that particular dusty lock of history. His conclusion to Ritter popped into my head, and made me shudder anew: "I often think that maybe if I hadn't done that, everything would have turned out all right."

I tried to match Merkle's lead, measuring a few tentative steps after Bridwell's admonition. Somehow it registered in me that Al was right, that I needed to stay tight to the bag. With my eyes closed, faint black-and-white images appeared of the baggy-panted players of 1908, then suddenly burst into previously unimagined colors. A car crossing an ill-fitting metal plate on the creaky 155th Street viaduct served to represent the crack of long-dead Bridwell's bat, and the rush of traffic on the nearby Harlem River Drive duplicated the roar of the Wednesday afternoon crowd, which I could suddenly feel, but not see, storming towards me. There was victory, I was sure, and as I began to run, there was great elation. But there was just as surely the uncertainty that even a celebratory mob represented, and after a few quick steps toward second, instinct told me to seek the safety of the clubhouse. I cut sharply to my right, and I seemed to be pulled along by legs intent on full speed.

I briefly registered the falsity, the impossibility, of a chain-link fence standing in what should have been the start of the great green vista of short right-centerfield, when a wave of confusion overtook me. There were – *I could hear them* – people yelling "Fred, Fred!" and I could sense some of those Cubs, their gray and brown uniforms barely visible, bobbing in the sea of suits and derbies that surrounded us. At that moment my mistake struck me, and I flailed my arms around to reverse my direction, push my way through the crowd swelling like a flooding river, and fairly leap on to second base, waving my arms crazily above my head so that anybody who *needed* to see me there, did so. Approaching from my left was the chiseled face of Johnny Evers, his free hand pounding a baseball into his glove, his lips taut as he produced a word I could read but not hear above the din.

I smiled and waved at Bridwell, separated from me by not more than twenty fans. His return gesture was unmistakable and we each turned and ran our own course through the pack. I shortly found myself, sweaty, frightened, but saved and happy, on a bench perhaps 500 feet from the plaque on the wall of the apartment building. As I caught my breath, and savored my triumph, I was relieved it was over, and that, a corrected error notwithstanding, I had played my part.

And that's when I realized what had happened, how I had been seemingly carried along, silently, as a spectator in my own body. I forced myself to swallow -- if not a scream -- then at least a shout.

I sat on the bench for about half an hour, the sweat pouring off me, my heart still pounding, chills still coming without warning. I knew of the fertile plain of my own imagination, but never conceived of even *it* producing such a complex set of images and stimuli, even under the

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Merkle Redivivus, continued from page 18.

inspiration and concentration of the moment. And what certainly shook me was the realization that one detail of the hallucination or daydream or borrowed memory had not come from anything I'd ever read before or since. Nowhere was there an account of Fred Merkle *jumping* onto second base, waving his arms above his head, and watching with relief as the disappointed Evers, beaten to his trick by a fraction of a second, swore at him.

When I fully composed myself, the meaning of what I had *felt* no longer seemed important. If it was the silliest kind of self-fulfilling wish, it still had the desired effect. I took out my notepad and wrote furiously what would become the better part of the final script for my first CNN piece on Fred Merkle. My masters had agreed to indulge me the camera crew and the airtime in our early sportscast on the night of the anniversary but warned me they could not fathom running more than once, a lengthy story without moving video or even *color* photographs. Then they saw it, and they ran it three times that night and a dozen more the following morning.

The camera crew showed up not long after the last of the words had spilled out onto the notebook, and after my confidence had peaked that I'd simply subconsciously summoned the whole world of September 23, 1908 and had experienced nothing more other-worldly than an extemporaneous speech on a subject I knew by heart.

And then the cameraman stopped fumbling with his tripod and looked at me carefully. "Jesus!" he mumbled.

"You look like you've seen a ghost."

I answered neither him nor myself.◆

Chairman's Column, continued from page 1.

Merkle out. Viewers would be able to confirm whether or not Giants' pitcher Joe McGinnity really intercepted the original ball and threw it into the stands before the forceout was completed. As Cait Murphy noted in *Crazy '08*, Christy Mathewson even claimed that he saw Merkle touch second base, while another newspaper account noted that some Cubs' fans physically restrained Merkle from completing the play.

A modern-day episode would be replete with confirming television and newspaper accounts, which were unavailable then. More practically, the game never would have been called on account of darkness today, and the crowd never would have been allowed to swarm the field. Still, the factors that came together on September 23, 1908 made for a unique baseball event that will never be duplicated.

The chaos surrounding the umpires in Merkle game only added to the drama. Facing a hostile crowd, umpire Hank O'Day made the unpopular call amidst the throng of fans. Of course, Johnny Evers was also especially savvy in forcing the issue. Evers' persistence was emblematic of an era where ballplayers were relied upon for their on-field savvy. Further, the subsequent debate in the days that followed about whether the game needed to be re-played brought together many of the quintessential Deadball Era figures, from John T. Brush to Harry G. Pulliam. With the relatively young game still getting its footing in the new century, baseball's leadership had to go back to first principles to decide how to deal with this issue, all in the thick of the pennant race.

Merkle, of course, deserved better. He was well-known to be a savvy player who excelled at bridge. Merkle remained a quietly capable performer for 14 more seasons after the incident and was a vital part of the Giants' pennant winning teams from 1911 through 1913. One of the great ironies of the incident is that Merkle was consistently among the team's leaders in stolen bases throughout his New York career; Merkle certainly had the speed to make it to second base safely had he chosen to do so. Yet his redeeming qualities are often lost to history, as the incident followed him for the rest of his life. In a sad twist of fate, Merkle appeared in five World Series after the 1908 incident and played on the losing side each time. Even while coaching with the New York Yankees in the 1926 World Series, unlucky Fred Merkle's team came up short of a World Championship.

It seems safe to assume that if baseball is still being played one hundred years from now, fans and scholars will recall the Merkle game with similar vigor. It is impossible to tell the story of the great 1908 season without it, and it can justifiably lay claim to being the most memorable baseball game ever played.◆

Merkle and Reading Keys, cont. from page 15.

On May 10 Billy Ashton announced that Merkle had resigned as manager and would be replaced by George Maisel. Billy Ashton's version of the story was that Merkle came to him, said only: "I'm quitting" then left with no further explanation.

Merkle's account differed considerably. He showed the press a telegram from William Ashton which stated: "It is necessary that I request you to resign at once." Merkle stated, "I did not resign. I was fired," adding, "How anyone could expect me to win after players I signed were released without my consent?"

The local press who frequently referred to Merkle as "Uncle Fred" and "The Mighty Crash" ,jumped to his support and attacked the Ashtons. *Eagle* Sports Editor Bill Reedy quoted John McGraw's description of Merkle as the "brainiest player (McGraw) ever had". Reedy added that Merkle, "... tried every possible means to make a winner out of the team with the little assistance he received from the owners. His plight in working under the most difficult conditions was appreciated by followers of the national pastime...."

With rumors circulating that the Keys were about to fold, on May 17, Ashton announced that he would sell his interest in the Keys to the Chicago Cubs. Cubs President William L. Veeck announced at the same time that the Cubs wanted Merkle back to manage the Keys and that the Cubs would send the Keys new players, and that Reading was a "good baseball town" that deserved a good team. Cubs' owner William Wrigley, Jr., stated: "We will spend money and give Reading a real baseball team."

A surprising development out of the sale to the Cubs was a disclosure by Merkle that he also had been attempting to purchase the Keys on behalf of a group whose identity he would not disclose. He also stated that he had been unaware of the Ashton's pending transaction with the Cubs until the official announcement—and that he was "taken off his feet" on learning of the pending sale, adding, "The fact that the Cubs were negotiating at the same time may explain my sudden and unexpected dismissal from the club."

Happy with the departure of the Ashtons, reports were that local fans were even happier with the return of Merkle. In the *Eagle* Bill Reedy wrote: "Even when the Keys were in the worst kind of a slump, losing game after game, the rooters at Lauers' park appreciated Merkle's efforts as manager."

After meeting with Cubs manager Joe McCarthy and Veeck, Merkle's enthusiasm with his new bosses was apparent, as he declared: "You can bet your bottom dollar that Wrigley will put a good ball club in Reading, and there won't be anything cheap about it." Veeck stated that Merkle would have absolute charge of the team and its players. It was a promising start.

The Cubs made it clear early that they wanted to be welcomed to Reading for reasons other than just replacing the Ashtons. Wrigley wired $500.00 to the Reading Community Chest. Veeck announced that the cost of admissions at Lauer's Park would be reduced, and that the park would be repainted before the next home stand. (Veeck had a policy that a ballpark should be a clean environment and welcoming to families—the same policy followed by his son Bill, Jr. in all the franchises he operated.)

While all this was going on, the Streak continued- over its course the Keys found all kinds of ways to lose, whether it was losing big—with nine losses by six runs or more—or losing the close ones—ten losses by one run.. Merkle resumed control of the club on May 22, when a doubleheader loss to Jersey City brought the Streak to 25. However, in the *Times,* Shandy Hill described the Keys as looking like a "different outfit", stating that the return of Merkle appeared to inject a "new spirit" into the Keys.

True to their word, the Cubs sent new players. Second

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Photo of Fred Merkle Field, Watertown, Wisconsin.
Photo courtesy of Dave Stalker

Merkle and Reading Keys, cont. from page 20.

basemen Harry J. Wilke and pitcher Roy Fred "Snipe" Hansen were sent to the Keys directly from the Cubs while outfielders Red Jarrett and Lloyd Trexler were sent from other Cubs affiliates. Allan Russell was re-signed and Rube Parnham (who held the International League record for wins and winning percentage based on his 33-7 record in 1923) was purchased from Baltimore along with outfielder George Quellich - who had been a teammate of Merkle's at Rochester.

On May 29 a freshly painted Lauer's Park featuring cheaper admissions welcomed a large and enthusiastic crowd (the Times reported 2,796 fans while the *Eagle* reported 5,000), who witnessed the extension of the Streak to 30 in a 17-6 loss to Baltimore. The Streak reached 31 with a 4-2 loss to Baltimore in the morning game of a Memorial Day doubleheader.

In the bottom of the 11th inning of the nightcap, Merkle's pinch hit single drove home the winning run—for a 9-8 Keys victory. The Streak was over. The *Eagle* related that 2,000 fans flooded onto the field and carried Merkle into the clubhouse, acting like a "team that had won the final World Series game and the world title." The Streak fell short of the then existing record of 32 consecutive losses suffered by the Austin Senators of the 1914 Texas League. The victory put the Keys' overall record to 4-41.

"...A very raw deal."

Trexler, Quellich and Jarrett immediately became the starting outfield. In the infield, Wilke replaced Hugh Farrell at second base. Young Arthur Oeschler replaced Sam Crane and his .194 average at shortstop. Goldie Rapp was replaced at third base by Tommy Sewell, who also sent directly from Cubs. (Sewell and his brothers Luke and Hall of Fame member Joe would amass 3,620 career major league hits among them—with only one coming from Tommy).

Despite the new lineup and additions to the pitching staff, the Keys went 8-22 in June, but showed promise in the first weeks of July, going 7-10. During that stretch they not only won a series, but also swept a double header - two things they had not done up to that time. Despite this progress, following a 3-2 victory against Rochester on July 20, for the second time in ten weeks, Fred Merkle was fired. Harry Hinchman, a friend of Cub manager Joe McCarthy, was immediately named as the new manager. The team's record was 21-77.

Merkle told reporters that he was given no reasons for his dismissal, declaring: "I have been given a very raw deal. A man's worst enemy would give him more of a chance than I have had." Adding that he was, "more than curious to know why (he) was given such treatment by the owners," he then expressed his theory that the change occurred because: "Joe McCarthy, manager of the Cubs, is pretty thick with Hinchman and I believe Joe asked Veeck to give (Hinchman) the job." Merkle termed it: "Payment of a baseball debt." Not surprisingly, immediately after Merkle's, dismissal Cubs Manager Joe McCarthy stated that, "Harry Hinchman will make a wonderful manager and will be a big improvement".

Under Hinchman (and the continued flow of new players) the Keys were 22-46- not good, but better than their 21-77 record under Merkle. The team's overall final record was 43-123- slightly better than 1926. Attendance improved to 82,642. With the exception of Dave Barbee surfacing for a few games with Pittsburgh in 1932, none of the Keys major league veterans would play in the big leagues again. A few of the younger Keys would eventually see time in the major leagues, the most prominent being Spud Davis, who hit .308 over a sixteen year career with the Phillies, Pirates, Reds and Cardinals. Kiddo Davis would play for the Phillies, Giants and Reds, while George Quellich would play briefly with Detroit in 1931. Red Crane, convicted of murder for the 1930 shooting of his former girlfriend and her male companion in a hotel bar, reportedly became the starting shortstop on the prison team and was able to hold onto that starting spot,

In contrast to the public outcry that occurred when Merkle was fired by the Ashtons, the reported reaction to his second firing was subdued. Bill Reedy wrote: "Once Merkle failed to strike a more winning pace with new players and better financial aid from the new owners, many of the fans turned on their former idol and openly criticized his methods from the stands. Thus again the fickleness of the sport public is revived."

Reedy pointed out that even Merkle's biggest critics "unanimously admit that Fred got a raw deal in that he was not even notified of the impending change...Merkle cannot be credited as a success nor can he be charged with being a failure. He has not had enough material to build up a winning club and to lay any blame for the Keys being in last place upon his shoulders would be a rank injustice. Merkle may have made some mistakes but he also did the Reading Club much good."

Insight into the private nature of Merkle's character and his dedication to the Keys is provided in the way he reacted to the death of his father on June 18, 1927. Ernest Merkle had suffered through a prolonged bout with cancer at the family home in Florida. According to Merkle's surviving daughter, Marianne Kasbaum, Ernest Merkle's illness was the primary subject of correspondence between Fred Merkle and his mother over the course of the summer. Nonetheless, Merkle didn't leave the Keys when his father finally passed on, and there was no mention of his loss in either the *Times* or the *Eagle*.

Post Script: "Mr. Merkle was a wonderful man."—Jim "Mudcat" Grant

From the Reading Keys, Merkle moved to Daytona Beach, Florida. After another attempt at managing (that ended when one of his players called him "bonehead") and he separated himself from baseball for a number of years. He also encountered a number of rough economic years, but found success in the fishing lure business. By the early

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Merkle and Reading Keys, cont. from page 21.

1950s he was back in baseball both as a part time scout and as a volunteer umpire.

In 1954, Merkle's most notable scouting discovery occurred while he was umpiring a high school game between two high schools, where eighteen year old Jim "Mudcat" Grant was pitching. In relating the events of that day, Mudcat first pointed out that very few umpires were willing to work games between "colored" schools during those years of segregation, adding that, "Fred did it all the time."

According to Mudcat, Merkle was having problems behind the plate because the catcher had trouble handling the velocity of Grant's pitches, adding with a chuckle: "High school catchers had trouble with my stuff at that point and these balls were hitting Fred on the shins and in the shoulders and in the chest and he was ducking—it was a pretty terrible thing." The end of the story is that after the game Merkle called the Cleveland Indians and said, "There's a guy who pitched today who almost killed me. You ought to take a look at him." The Indians signed Grant a short time later.

After that day, Grant developed a friendship with Merkle and his wife Edith. When Grant came to spring training with the Indians in Daytona Beach on several occasions he was a guest in the Merkle home for lunch or dinner. This made a deep impression on Grant: "I was just a young kid, but I could see (the Merkles) were different. They were white people that just acted different from what I was used to down there. I really appreciated how they treated a young kid like me, even though I really couldn't articulate it at the time. Mr. Merkle was a wonderful man."

In 1956 Merkle died from a heart condition at the age of 67. The headline in his obituary read: "Fred Merkle Dies; Remembered More for Boner Than Good Plays". During his lifetime, Merkle once commented to a friend that someone would probably write, "Bonehead" on his headstone. He is buried in an unmarked grave, next to his parents. According to his daughter Marianne, "Dad is buried with (his parents) but his name was not put on the stone. I think it was that nobody ever got around to it, rather than a concerted effort to avoid publicity."

Chief Meyer, Merkle's teammate on the Giants for seven years said of Merkle: "[T]he smartest man on the [Giants] was the "bonehead", Mr. Merkle. [Manager John] McGraw never consulted anyone except Merkle on a question of strategy or something of that sort....He'd say 'Fred, what do you think of this?' The bonehead! What a misnomer! One of the smartest men in baseball—Fred Merkle. Isn't that something! It's the truth. It shows what newspapers can do to you."◆

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Who's to Blame? cont. from page 5.

1908, as quoted in G. H. Fleming's *The Unforgettable Season*:

"If Western fans would only forget their rabid soreness against New York and anything and everything hailing from the big city, baseball would be better off and the danger of a war between this country and Japan would be reduced to a minimum." He seems to suggest that to root against the Giants was un-American. Yet it's doubtful he wanted the east-west rivalry to cease.

Little attention of the Gill game was given in the New York papers. It was noted–both the Pirates and the Cubs were challenging the Giants for first place–but the details of the protest that the Cubs employed was ignored in New York. However, papers in Chicago and Pittsburgh covered it in detail. The *Pittsburgh Post*, according to Fleming, said, the "next time it happens it is safe to predict that none who took part in the game will overlook the importance of touching the next base."

While you could argue that information was not obtained as quickly in those days, and that a newspaper from Pittsburgh or Chicago was not easily obtained in New York, therefore no one in New York, player or manager, could have been expected to learn about the incident in Pittsburgh, the argument falls apart when you consider that immediately after the game on the 23rd, the *New York Herald* noted the similarity to the earlier game when Gill had not touched second and Chicago had protested. Telegraph communication permitted the reporters to obtain information on games in other cities.

The *New York Evening Mail* even quotes Christy Mathewson as saying that he remembered the "trick" Chicago tried to pull a few weeks earlier in Pittsburgh. In addition, any National League protest, which was filed in New York City, would have been available to the press. I think it's logical to assume that the New York papers simply ignored the Gill game, something they would not have done if a New York baseball team had been involved. Once the September 23 game was declared a tie, instead of a victory for the Giants, the papers of course took notice. They blamed Fred Merkle: "...all our boys did rather well if Fred Merkle could gather the idea into his noodle that baseball custom does not permit a runner to take a shower and some light lunch in the clubhouse on the way to second." (The *New York Herald* as quoted in Fleming's book.) The *Chicago Tribune* was just as bad calling Merkle "fat-headed."

It was harsh. Baseball "custom" at the time *had* previously allowed players not to complete a play before heading to the showers. It was a baseball rule that did not permit it. Soon the New York papers were blaming Chance, Cubs owner Charles Murphy and clever Johnny Evers for stealing the game away. The Chicago papers complained about the supposed unfairness of having to play in New York. They viewed the game as a playoff–which should have been a three game series–rather than a replay of the tied game. The implication was that the New York club was trying to get away with something. The focus was back on the rivalry and the assumed superiority of each team, according to which city's newspapers one read. Joe Tinker once said, "If you didn't honestly and furiously hate the Giants, you weren't a real Cub."

Perhaps I.E. Sanborn, writing in the *Chicago Tribune*, was right when he suggested that if New York sportswriters had better covered what was happening outside of New York they would not have had to work so hard to convince the public that the Giants had been robbed of a victory on a technicality. According to Fleming he said, "Outside of Manhattan island, however, where baseball is considered a national pastime and not a form of paying tribute to New York, it is a recognized fact that the Giants lost that victory over the Cubs by a blunder..."

David Anderson in his book *More Than Merkle* makes an excellent case for blaming National League President Harry Pulliam. When he rendered his decision regarding the Cubs protest over the September 4 game against Pittsburgh he failed to ensure that such a thing wouldn't happen again. Anderson says, "Had Pulliam taken the lead of the Pittsburgh Press and directed his umpires to be aware of the Gill play, there probably would have been no Merkle boner." Of course, there are many things that could have happened that would have prevented the Merkle game, including if Fred Merkle himself had touched second. Trying to place the blame on any single factor is a fruitless endeavor, but the influence of the media during this fascinating time in baseball history should not be counted out.◆

Sullen Giants rooters touch second on their way out of the Polo Grounds, after the replay, October 8, 1908. Library of Congress, George Bain Collection.