

## **Thrilling World Series captivated nation back in 1926**

Football, it's been clear for several decades now, is the national pastime, having assumed the mantle long held by that most American of games—baseball. An aging, shrinking Major League Baseball fan base means that most playoff games nowadays attract smaller television audiences than ho-hum regular season National Football League contests.

Simply and sadly put, even the “Fall Classic”—as the World Series is known—is in danger of becoming culturally irrelevant, certainly on a national level.

Such was not always the case. From Oct. 2 to Oct. 10, 1926—93 years ago—the nation's attention turned to the World Series between the National League champion St. Louis Cardinals and their American League counterparts, the New York Yankees.

Robert Arthur “Bob” O’Farrell, the Cardinals catcher and N.L. MVP that year, would later serve one season (1938) as manager of the minor league Bloomington Bloomers.

Back in early Oct. 1926, area residents could purchase a World Series-special \$4 round trip ticket between Bloomington and St. Louis on the Illinois Traction System, an “interurban” electric rail line that once connected many Central Illinois communities (\$4 in the fall of 1926 would be the equivalent of more than \$58 today, adjusted for inflation.)

Of course, few local residents made it down to St. Louis to watch a game in person. Let it be said, though, that Frank Steiner, a Chicago & Alton Railroad flagman from Bloomington, used a week off to attend one or more games in the Bronx!

The 1926 World Series was also held before the rise and ubiquity of radio, and its transformative role reshaping American society and popular culture in the following decade.

Even so, there was an exciting way for local fans to follow the nail-biting action in real-time—pitch by pitch, inning by inning. At this time, daily papers and other news outlets made use of what were known as magnetic or electronic “player boards” to create a rough facsimile of the real action taking place at faraway big league ballparks.

In The Pantagraph's case, this commercially manufactured mechanical device—roughly the size a small movie screen—was installed on the newspaper's south wall, facing the 300 block of W. Washington St. During games, the play-by-play, which at the time arrived by telegraph, was then relayed to a team of board operators who skillfully manipulated a steel ball, “bat” and other

moving pieces over a diagram of a baseball field. An announcer, carried via loudspeaker, would supplement the action. Surrounding the “field” were the updated line score and lineups, similar to what one would find on a Major League park scoreboard.

“An expert announcer and a corps of experienced operators promise you good service,” stated The Pantagraph of its “big electric player board.”

The Cardinals, after dropping Games 4 and 5 in St. Louis (Babe Ruth hit a World Series record three home runs in Game 4), found themselves trailing 3 games to 2 as they headed back to New York. They would need to win the final two games in the best-of-seven series to be crowned World Series champions.

In Game 6, held Sat, Oct. 9, future Hall of Fame right-hander Grover Cleveland Alexander of St. Louis—one of the greatest pitchers in baseball history—earned his second complete-game victory of the series as the Cards dispatched the Yanks 10-2.

Thus the 1926 World Series came down to a winner-take-all Game 7 in the Bronx.

In Bloomington, the Sunday afternoon finale attracted an overflow crowd that spilled onto Madison Street. Interurban cars trundling down Madison Street had to slow to a crawl to navigate the multitude. A large group of younger fans kept tabs on the game from the roof of C.W. Frey’s garage. It was called the largest crowd in city history to “witness” a World Series game.

“At times the cheering was so loud that the operators on the board had difficulty in hearing the announcer,” observed The Pantagraph, “but so perfectly did The Pantagraph’s big board reproduce each play that the spectators had no difficulty in following the progress of the game.”

Meanwhile, back in the Bronx, in the bottom of the seventh inning, New York second baseman Tony Lazzeri stepped up to the plate with the bases loaded. With St. Louis clinging to a 3-2 lead, Cardinals skipper Rogers Hornsby called for Alexander—who had pitched nine hard innings the day before—to relieve starting pitcher Jesse Haines. The story goes that Alexander, whose demons included alcohol, had “tied one on” the night before and was fast asleep bullpen.

Be that as it may, “Old Pete” (as Alexander was known) roused himself sufficiently to get Lazzeri—a future Hall of Famer in his own right—to strike out swinging. “Can you imagine yourself at this kind of ball game?” one radio announcer wondered aloud in amazement as the two big league stars faced off with the whole shebang on the line.

Two innings later, in the bottom of the ninth, with St. Louis still up 3-2 and needing only one more out, Alexander walked Babe Ruth (who back in the third inning had hit his fourth homerun of the series.) With Ruth on first base, the Yankees leftfielder Bob Meusel stepped into the batter's box. Then, with all eyes on Meusel and Alexander into his windup, Ruth unexpectedly bolted for second.

Yes, you read that right: The Babe was attempting to steal second base with two outs in the bottom of the ninth inning, in a World Series Game 7, and his team trailing by one run!

Despite his somewhat portly physique, Ruth was a surprisingly decent base runner. But on this Sunday afternoon, the Baseball Gods frowned on this brazenly impulsive act. Cardinals catcher Bob O'Farrell fired the ball to second base and "the Great Bambino" was tagged out—it wasn't even close!—and just like that World Series was over and the Cardinals were world champions.

In spring of 1938, after his big league playing days were behind him, Cards backstop Bob O'Farrell settled in Bloomington to pilot the Bloomers for one season in the Illinois-Indiana-Iowa League. O'Farrell, who grew up in Waukegan, Ill., was no stranger to the "Three-I" League. Two decades earlier, he played most of two seasons (1916 and 1917) for the Peoria Distillers.

The former Cardinals catcher and his famed battery mate, Grover Cleveland Alexander, were reunited in Bloomington when "Old Pete" brought his semi-pro Empires of Springfield, Ill. to Fans Field for a preseason exhibition game (see accompanying photograph.)

O'Farrell had a frustrating year in Bloomington, as the Bloomers—playing before a smattering of fans on most days—finished seventh in the eight-team Illinois-Indiana-Iowa League. The following season, 1939, would prove to be the last for Bloomington in the storied Class B circuit.

"You know, I wondered why Ruth tried to steal second then," O'Farrell recalled long after the 1926 World Series. "A year or two later I went on a barnstorming trip with the Babe and I asked him. Ruth said he thought 'Alex' (Grover Cleveland Alexander) had forgotten he was there. Also that the way Alex was pitching they'd never get two hits in a row off him, so he better get in position to score if they got one. Well, maybe that was good thinking and maybe not. In any case, I had him out a mile at second."