

## **Catcher's mitt tells story of big leaguer 'Butch' Henline**

The collections of the McLean County Museum of History include some 20,000 objects, and everyone one of them has a story to tell.

An early 19th century wooden moldboard plow used by Blooming Grove pioneer Thomas Orendorff, for instance, offers a tangible link to the early settlement period now nearly two centuries past. And a late 20th century Ganesh statue once belonging to Bloomington resident Balwant Singh speaks to the immigrant experience and the emergence of the area's large and dynamic Indian community.

This being springtime, though, let us turn away from the more serious subjects of work and faith to matters of play, specifically men at play and the game of baseball.

One the many wonderful artifacts in the history museum relating to the national pastime is a well-worn catcher's mitt around 100 years old. It was once the glove of Walter J. "Butch" Henline, a Major League catcher of the 1920s who got his start with the Bloomington Bloomers of the old Illinois-Indiana-Iowa (I-I-I) League.

Also known as the Three-I, Three Eye or even "Triple Orb," the I-I-I was a respected low minor league with a reputation for developing promising prospects for the "high" minors, such as the Pacific Coast League and the American Association. And many of these young players would eventually punch their ticket to "the Show" (the Major Leagues).

Bloomington was a member of the Three Eye for nearly four decades, from its inaugural season of 1901 to 1939. The Bloomers (for that was the club's nickname most years) played at Fans Field on the city's far south side. The long-gone ball field is now the site of Bloomington Parks and Recreation's R.T. Dunn Fields, which are behind the National Guard armory.

The story of how one of Butch Henline's gloves made it to the McLean County Museum of History begins in the spring of 1919 and the start of the Three-I League season.

After a year-and-a-half hiatus due to World War I, the Three Eye reformed in 1919, though with two fewer clubs than the preferred eight-team arrangement. The Bloomers were joined that season by the Evansville Black Sox, Moline Plowboys, Peoria Tractors, Rockford Rox and the Terre Haute Browns, making for an Illinois-Indiana-Iowa League with no representative from the Hawkeye State (the Cedar Rapids Rabbits would join the league for the 1920 campaign).

With less than two weeks before the start of the 1919 season, Bloomers skipper Joe Dunn picked up Butch Henline from the Indianapolis Indians of the American Association, with the expectation that the talented-but-green prospect would end the season back in Indy. Henline earned \$150 a month with the Bloomers, or the equivalent of \$2,200 in today's dollars, adjusted for inflation.

Bloomington's season began May 5 with a 1-0 victory over the visiting Tractors of Peoria. These two clubs traded first place several times during the first two months of the season before the Bloomers pulled away around Independence Day. The season ended Sept. 1 with the pennant winners 39 games above .500 at 80-41, and second-place Peoria some 12 games back at 68-54.

As expected, Henline was sent to Indianapolis in early September to join the Indians for the final weeks of American Association play.

The 24-year-old catcher then returned to Bloomington for the winter, and this city became his off-season home for several years. At some point during his time in Bloomington he became involved with Lincoln School teacher Marguerite (Margaret) Miller. At Lincoln, a grade school on Bloomington's south side, Miller helped run district-wide music programs, among her many other teaching duties.

In 1920, Joe Dunn and his Bloomers repeated as Three-I League champs. Despite a "flattering offer" from local ownership to stay in Bloomington, Henline returned to Indianapolis where he could prove himself over the long season against top-tier talent. And sure enough, two years later he was the everyday catcher with the big league Philadelphia Phillies.

From 1922 to 1924, Henline appeared in at least 110 games a season for the Phillies, batting a healthy .308 during that time. Although not known as a long-ball hitter in the majors, he made a splash in his first full season when he hit three homers in a single game, Sept. 15, 1922, against the St. Louis Cardinals.

Even after Henline established himself as a well-paid big league backstop, he still "wintered" in Bloomington, likely pulled to icy, windswept Central Illinois by a certain school teacher. During the off-season he kept in shape by, among other things, bowling. In early 1923 The Pantagraph noted that he had the area's highest single-game score of the season "when he cut the wood down for the count of 278."

Butch Henline and Margaret Miller married on Oct. 25, 1923, in the groom's hometown of Fort Wayne, Ind. The couple returned to Bloomington and lived for several years in an attractive wood-frame house on the 1000 block of South Main Street.

In 1927, Henline was part of three-team trade that sent him to Brooklyn, and for three seasons he was the reserve catcher for the Robins (as the Dodgers were then known). His Major League career sputtered to an end in Chicago where he appeared in 14 games over two seasons, 1930-1931, for the White Sox.

The Henlines, who had moved to Sarasota, Fla., operated a hotel that attracted a fair number of Bloomington vacationers and snowbirds. Butch Henline, unable to give up the game he loved, eventually took to umpiring, working his way up through the minors to become a National League official for four seasons, 1945 to 1948. He was even part of the umpiring crew for the 1947 All-Star Game.

Walter “Butch” Henline passed away on Oct. 9, 1957 at the age of 62, and Margaret Miller Henline followed in 1979.

Okay, you might be asking yourself, what about Henline’s catcher’s mitt now in the collections of the McLean County Museum of History? Well, sometime around 1926, Margaret Miller, who by that time was married to Henline, gave Bloomington High School student Ed LaBounty one of her husband’s catcher’s mitts. LaBounty had attended Lincoln School, and several years later he still kept in touch with his former eighth grade teacher. When she learned that LaBounty was the high school catcher she gave him the glove.

Ed LaBounty kept the old mitt into adulthood and marriage. Ownership eventually fell to Ed’s son Bill LaBounty, who remembers using it on occasion when playing American Legion ball in the 1940s, though by that time the “old-style” mitt had become more of a curiosity piece than a game day glove.

The catcher’s mitt remained in the LaBounty family until 2004. That’s when Bill, having decided it needed a safe, permanent home, donated it to the McLean County Museum of History. Today Henline’s glove is stored in a secure, climate-controlled storage room to ensure it will be around long into the future, ready to tell its story to generations yet to come.