

The Whooshball and the Historic House

January 1991

Behind each historic landmark in our community is the story of a distinguishing person, a memorable event, or sometimes both. The accomplishments of an athlete, the recent efforts of some diligent community members, and Montgomery County's programs supporting historic preservations all combined to give histories designation in 1990 to the Walter Johnson House at the corner of Old Georgetown Road and Cedar Lane. The story of "WJ," for whom the house is named, began in the last issue.

After pitching a startling shutout in his debut with his California high school team, Walter Johnson kept polishing his newly discovered skills. A few years later, he landed jobs with semi-pro baseball teams, first in Tacoma, Washington, and then in Weiser, Idaho, a small community close to the Snake River and the Oregon border. "Semi-pro" apparently meant doing a lot more than pitching: his contract called for digging post-holed for the Weiser Telephone Company – this plus pitching for a total of \$75.00 per month.

In 1907 an American League scout persuaded "WJ" to come east and play for the Washington Nationals in the District of Columbia. What WJ thought about his prospects in the bid leagues isn't clear, but his father apparently had some doubts. Frank Johnson insisted that, if his son didn't succeed in Washington, the team would pay for the trip back to Idaho.

But from the start there was no doubt about the young man's ability. The first batter he faced was Davy Jones of Detroit. At age 85, Jones remembered that August day well, reported Lee Allen and Tom Means in *Kings of the Diamond*: "I don't think Johnson ever pitched a fast ball in his life than the first one he threw me. It was a strike of course. And I can see it yet. Johnson was the greatest them all."

The Washington Nationals were an undistinguished team, but the pitch that some called the "wooshball" – WJ's fastball – kept frustrating the opposing batters for the next two decades. He acquired some nicknames: the "Humbolt Thunderbolt," "the Kansas Cyclone" – references to his midwestern birthplace. The most memorable came when sportswriter Granland Rice wrote "The Big Train Comes to Town" and a New York cartoonist drew a large train engine, with WJ's face as the headlight.

Some baseball experts can recite his major league statistics from memory – 414 games won, 113 shutouts, 3508 strikeouts – to name a few. His team triumphed in 1924, when WJ pitched the final three innings of the seventh and title-winning game of the World Series: "Gridden Triumph in 12-Innings Battle as City Goes Wild" went the headline.

The following year, WJ moved with his wife Hazel and their children to the tall frame house and farm on Old Georgetown Road. In 1936, when baseball's Hall of Fame was established, WJ became one of its five charter members, along with Babe Ruth, Ty Cobb, Honus Wagner, and Christ Mathewson.

Over the years, WJ also formed close ties with his community. After retiring from baseball, he served as a Montgomery County Commissioner for six years. Throughout his life his personal qualities made a big impression; a Washington Post columnist noted "he simply commanded love with his kindness and gentleness and honesty."

In 1956, ten years after WJ's death, a community member suggested that his name be given to the new high school near Old Georgetown Road. Some school publications still echo the baseball theme: the student newspaper is *The Pitch*; the yearbook, *The Windup*; the activity handbook, *Extra Innings*; and the PTSA newsletter, *The Big Train*. In the 1980's some community members started working to have WJ's home included in the county's historic landmarks. A year ago in March the Walter Johnson house was placed in the county's master plan for historic preservation.

Built in 1906, the house stands amid tall trees at a slight angle to Old Georgetown Road. It's an example of colonial revival architecture, with stone foundation, symmetrical design, and wide front porch with

supporting wooden columns, third-floor dormer, and hipped roof. Inside, according to one newspaper account, there are still “nooks and crannies everywhere.” The house is now the home of the tutorial service “The Teaching Team”

And at the school, a plaque from Washington’s old Griffith Stadium pays tribute to “a champion on and off the field.”

(Written by Charlotte Wunderlich, with special thanks again to WJ Assistant Principal Charles Rideout and the staff of area public libraries.)