

INTERVIEW WITH BILL WAMBSGANSS

Yes, I was born in Cleveland, but My ^{Folkes} ~~Ford~~ moved to Fort Wayne when I was about a year and a half old. See, my father was a Lutheran clergyman and he was out here in Garfield Heights. So I'm really a Hoosier ballplayer~~s~~.

I was going to college and became semi-pro player in Fort Wayne. Went to Concordia College there. but getting down into the pith of the thing, see, I was going prepared for the ministry, like my dad, see. In those days, you see, the old fashioned Luthers thought that all you had to do was send your boy to college -- high persuasion, you know -- and the Lord would take care of all the rest. He'd get through college and graduate and be put someplace and through experience and practice, he would become a preacher. Well, I followed those things out, as a youngster. Course I got along pretty good with my studies. But then I got to playing ball on the campus. Just kids though, you know. 19, 20 or so. Then you'd have to go to St. Louis for three years of theological training. So, I was wading through all this and then when I got to playing ball, why all I did was sit in the classrooms and look out the window wishing the class would be over so I could go out and play ball. That was my greatest wish.

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About becoming a minister .. well, I just couldn't figure how it could happen. You know, there was my own father. I just dreaded the time that it would come to a head someday and I wouldn't know how to ~~xx~~ take care of it. Cause, I simply couldn't get myself to do the job, talking to people and all. And besides that I was a very nervous fellow and I stuttered quite a bit. One time I got up to make a recitation in school, preparatory work for the ministry, you know. Well, I couldn't get a word out.

Well, nobody at the college was willing to take the bull by the horns and say, Well, this kid can't be a minister. But I went on through, It's a joke, but I did. Went on down to St. Louis to the theological Seminary down there. But in a year, while I was down there, I had a chance to go out for professional ball.

See, one of the other fellows on the Seminary team had played some pro ball and the same team he was with, Cedar Rapids ball club manager came to his team for recommendadeions and he told them about me. Well, I went out to Cedar Rapids, Iowa. And that's how I got my start. 1913, Organized Baseball, Class D, Cedar Rapids.

I went out there during the 1913 vacation from the Seminary. I came home and I had this offer to go to Cedar Rapids, and talked to my father about it. Joined them the first of July. Course my father really was in ✓

favor of sports. He was a great one for all sports. He was in favor of it. Great baseball fan and all that. So he let me go and play.

Then when I went back to the Seminary that fall, term started in September, they have opportunities for the students to go and get practical experience in the ministry, you know. Well, there was a place in Fremont North Dakota that wanted a man to teach school until Easter. Well, that fitted right in with my plans, see. So I went up there and taught school and then after Easter I was ~~free~~ free and easy and that was just about when the baseball season started, so out I went to Cedar Rapids.

Then I was sold to Cleveland during that summer and I came to Cleveland during August. As a shortstop.

Now then, I had to go and straighten this all out with my father, which I did. I told him I did not want to become a minister, that I didn't think I was equal to the task, and that I always had ambitions to become a professional ballplayer, and knew I had enough talent, at least to be sold to Cleveland, and it seems as if it all was going to come true. Well, he agreed and so I became a player.

You know, I took all that so serious. Even now, when I think about it or talk about it, I still take it serious. But I didn't have any trouble whatsoever from my parents, which is a big thing, when you come to think of

it.

Funny thing, I sot so nervous that I couldn't even talk in front of people, but I wasn't nervous a bit out there on the ballfield with 30,000 people looking at me. No, that wears off ~~re~~ quick. Do it every day, you know, and it wears off.

You know that little poem that Ring Lardner wrote when he was in Chcicago writing sports for the Tribune? It's a little limerick: (see, at that time the Cleveland team was known as the Naps. After Napol~~ion~~ Lajoie, so they called them the Naps.) I'd come to Chicago to join the Cleveland club in August 1914, and Ring Lardner was writing sports, course he ~~was~~ a great writer. Must have ben a very good reported cause he knew all the things that wer going on and apparently it got on the news wires that this guy Wambsganss was going to join the Cleveland club, see, as shortstop.)

The Naps bought a shortstop named Wambsganss

Who is slated to fill Ray Chapman's pants.

But when he saw Ray

And the way he could play,

He muttere^d, "I haven't a clam's chance."

There's another poem, too. Later on when I was playing with
Cleveland and we'd come to New York one day to play at the Polo Grounds,
I was on the elevated to go out there and I had a paper and was reading it.
Well, Grantland Rice was writing for the paper I was reading. He wrote
a poem I thought was ...well, you read it yourself. It's entitled,
"The Way of the Game". I believe that Rice meant the game of baseball when
he wrote this poem. And goes like this:

The way of the game

Now summer goes
And tomorrow's snows
Will soon be deep.

And skies of blue
Which the summer knew
See shadows creep.

And the gleam tonight
Which is silver bright
Spans ghostly forms.

As the winds rush by
And with a warning cry
Of coming storms.

So the laurel fades
In the snow-swept glades
Of flying years.

And the dreams of youth
Find the bitter truth
Of pain and tears.

So the cheering mass.
Let the victors pass
To find fate's thrust
As tomorrow's fame
Finds another name
On drifting dust.

You know Rube Marguard's a Cleveland boy. Came from the neighborhood of Clark and 44th, and all the firemen of that fire district, when he started to play professional ball, chipped in and bought him a pair of baseball shoes, so he could go out and play ball. Now that's what my father-in-law, who was a fireman, told me.

Babe Ruth and I were the same age; born the same year, ~~19~~ 1894. Great ballplayer. I played against him ~~xx~~ when he pitched, before anyone even knew that he'd become a hitter.

See, my father was a Cleveland fan, and I always wanted to play for Cleveland. See, like in the poem, I came up and saw Ray Chapman and what a great player he was. See, I come up as a shortstop but because of that they shoved me over to second base, see. They had tried me at third base too, 1915. In '16, starting off the season, I didn't get to play, they put me on the bench. See, I was really still just developing, not yet good enough. Then, one of the early games of that season, Chapman hurt his knee badly and had to go out of the game. Water on the knee. And that don't go away so quick, so they had to have another shortstop and they put me in there. Well, I played shortstop almost that whole year, until about a month before the season ended when Chapman was able to go back in again and wanted to play short. So that talk'd it over and says, Well, we'll put

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put Wamby at second. So I moved over to second. Same in 1917. Chpaman always said nobody else'd ever play second alongside him! And, sadly enough, that was true. He got killed in 1920.

See, I didn't have to cover second base most of the time when Cobb was on the field. CAuse, see there~~xxx~~ was always men after him who would hit the ball to right field, so the shortstop was covering second, see. Was Chapman in most cases. He'd always have little joke about how he'd go after Cobb and tag him! Why one of the furst games that I played (I;d come to cleveland in August, see, and that gave me enough to play all the teams and, matter of fact, I made all the towns, too, that last part of the season). Well, anyway, we were playing in Detroit one day and I had just joined the ballclub. They were trying to rattle me by yelling at me. You know, their bench was right opposite the third base position. 14 or 15 feet away, only. Well, all these guys are yelling at me, while I'm playing third. I had noticed that Ty Cobb was yelling at me too, and I thought that that was really something. A star like Ty Cobb, picking on a raw rookie! Well, I yealed something back over at him, much as to say, you call me busher, well I call you bush, too, busher yourself! So, he come up to bat, and before the game, Turner, who had been playing short at Cleveland for many years before that, a veteran ballplayer at the time. He told me that Cobb had

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had a trick of getting up to bat and bunting. He's a very good bunter, he told me. But, he says, if he's going to bunt, he'll grit his teeth. He'll get up there and grit his teeth, looking like he's going to murder the ball, see. Well, when he grinds his teeth, see, it's to throw you off and then he'll just dribble on down towards third and he's as fast as streaked lightning and he'll beat it out. So you got to watch him.

So, after all this rhabarib going on, I was watching him anyway, but I was watching him special for this teeth gritting, see. Well, he come up to bat, and stood there, and since he was a left handed batter, I could see his face real good, and he's standing there gritting his teeth. Well, I thought, he's going to lay down a bunt. And I started crawling in on him. Finally he just stuck out his bat and slashed one and it came right at me. I was looking up and put out my hand, and caught the ball!

First time I came to bat, the second baseman, we were playing Washington, bobbled the ball. Put me in to pinch hit, my first time at bat in the Big League. Nick Altrock, the comedian coach, he was with Washington. Used to pull real antics on the coaching lines. Real comedian.

Well, Veek used to have that guy Max Peckman, or something like that come around the park as a coach. Clown, you know. All kinds of real funny antics, you know. He was a double jointed contortionist

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and he'd bend down real low, bend himself in half, backward, you know, and steal all the signs off the catcher! He was only allowed on the field ~~of~~ for one inning, though.

I don't want to be quoted on what I think about Bill Veek, now. I know a lot of people wouldn't agree with what I think about him. It seems to me like this: Bill Veek came here and managed to buy the ball club, got enough money to do that, with Melvin Bradley, who's a very conservative operator of ballclubs here, and not too popular. But, the fans in those years in Cleveland, like they would in any city, had the illusion that the team is their team and so when Bill Veek came here, Bill Veek took the town, by storm, without a doubt. And not only that, but he won a pennant and the championship. Now what more could you expect? This is our team, Bill Veek, he's our man, see? They took him to their hearts, and the whole team with him. This entire city took ~~them~~ him into their heart because he did the thing they wanted him to do: brought their team up were they wanted it. They went head over heels in love with Bill Veek and all of a sudden there was an announcement in the paper that Bill Veek had sold the ballclub! That he had divorced his wife, by whom he had three children, but she didn't like his way of living. Course Bill Veek was at home anywhere, but she wasn't that kind of a person. So to get it settled

and get the divorce and be quit of everything, why he sold the ballclub and whatever he made out of it, he settled on his wife and three children. Now, that's true. There were some people who bought the club after that in whom the people had confidence. Ellis Ryan, who was an associate of Al Suttman who built the Arena here and built up American League Hockey in Cleveland. Ellis Ryan was the president of the Cleveland ballclub after Bill Veek. Now, we can get away from Hank Greenberg, and all those things like that, we don't have to bring that in at all! Although I don't think Hank was so popular here, either, but Bill brought him here and that was that!

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I can't say that I adjusted to the afct that I couldn't play so good in the later years. At first I didn't adjust too well, I can tell you. And it was right in the depression, too, you ~~in~~ know. 1932 was mylast year in professional ball. I left the big leagues in '26, that was my last year, and then I played minor league ball. Managed Springfield, Ill, too, and at that time Roy Hamey was the general manager. Three I league. Elmer Smith, my teammate, was out of a job and wanted to play ball with me. Well, I talked to Hamey about it, but he says, Nwa, you can't take Elmer Smith here, this is a kid's league. Well, I said, I can't tell Elmer Smith that I can't give him a job. Why, he's my best friend and a great ballplayer ✓

Well, he says, it's up to you. You're the manager. So I brought Smitty on and the first day, he hit a couple of home runs for us and won the ball game. After the game, Hamey comes up and says, Bill, that guy can still hit

Then, see, the opportunities for managing simply ceased to exist.

During the depression jobs were scarce and , just like with anything else, you'd look around for a job and there just wasn't any. Couldn't get any.

So I got out of the game and had a chance to work with a team on the sand lots and to associate myselfe with the Fischer Foods Corp. And then too, I amnaged the girls. Did that for four years.

No, the men didn't have a thing to go to when they got through.

Course there were some isolated instances. Played with a man name of Joe Evans who became a doctor. Good one, too. Jack Green, remember him, he got into broadcasting. But those are just isolated cases. Most of the boys, why they go back to where they came from and work themselves in with something else.

About the time I came to Cleveland they had the Federal League.

Outlaw league. Really the Federal leage broke up about *5 '15, but these towns around here, Kenosha, Racine, and all, they had what they called an Outlaw League. That was the name of it. Affiliated with the professional game. Well, one of the guys played in the Outlaw League began the company

I'm with now. Nuts and bolts. Truefit Screw Products. He was a very inventive man, devised all new types of fittings and screws and bolts. Well, he was also a great baseball fan and had backed baseball teams and basket ball teams. So, at the time that I was managing the girls teams, around 1945, he called me up and invited me and Steve O'Neill to come to a dinner he was giving for the teams he backed. Well, Steve O'Neill couldn't make it, but he was such a grand guy, that I said I would go and give the little talk he wanted me to make. Well, we were sitting next to each other and chewin gh the fat and all, and he offered me a job.

I'd always manage to get differnt kind of jobs in the off season, when I was playing. I worked for the May Company once, like that.

When I got through playing ball, I did do some scouting for the Yankees, too.

When I played, at the beginning, especailly those first years, \$3,000 was considered a pretty good salary for a man who had established himself as a big league ballplayer. \$5,000 was considered very good. Then in the 20's why there was a sort of boom in the country those years and everyone was making more money. More people put to work and sort of a boom. Times were pretty good then, and salaries went up in the big leagues. No such thing as a minimum, of course, like they have today. Mimumum was ✓

minimum then, you might say!

When I first started to play ball, that year in the minors, I got \$100 a month. Expenses were paid. On the road, that is.

It was really nothing out of the ordinary, when after all those years of playing with Cleveland I got traded to ~~Wax~~ Boston, you know. That was just part of the game. You simple learn to expect it. That wasn't so much of a shock. The shock came when I began realizing that I was through! When that realization comes to a person, that's hard. You know, even Musial had tears in his eyes when he announced his retirement this year.

At the time I was traded I had just bought this house here in Cleveland, and my wife was pregnant! Moved in here December 1923 and no more than got settled when, before Christmas, we got the announcement that I was traded to Boston.

On that Cleveland team , before I was traded, Tris Speaker played center field and managed, see. Steve O'Neill was catching. Charlie Jamieson was there, too. And Coveleski the great spitball pitcher. Got the whole story in a book I got together on the 1920 World Series. Like a scrapbook. In fact, the fellow that made the book, really, went and got my scrapbook and had it copied, you know, reproduced, and made them all up.

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q Yep, we had special uniforms made up, says World's Champions, on them. We wore those uniforms all season. Larry Gardner was on the team, too, comes from ~~Enos~~ Enosville Falls, Vermont. Joe Wood, too. He was the

Well, I'll tell you about that unassisted triple play. To give you the whole background of the series, you know, we went to Brooklyn for a 9 game series. In 1920 and '21 the World S^eries ~~was~~ was a possible 9 game series. We'd play the first three games in Brooklyn and won the first game, I think...well won one out of three, anyway. Then we came back to Clebeland with that kind of record. Played a Saturday game and won it and that evened the series at two and two. Then came the Sunday game.

In the first inning, we'd filled the bases. Jamieson led off and I got a hit and that put runners on first and second. Well, then, Tris Speaker came to bat and laied down a bunt which Burleigh Grimes went of to field, along the 3 base line and he slipped and fell down and couldn't make the play and speaker reached ^{first} ~~first~~ and I went on ~~second~~ to second and Jamieson went on to third. Well, that was the situation when up comes Elmer Smith and hits a home run, over the fence. That was the first grand slam home run in World Series history! Well, the game progressed until the fourth inning and Grimes was still pitching. He was a righthanded spitball pitcher. Great national league pitcher for years.

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Well, in that fourth inning, ~~they~~^{we} had a runner on second base with two out. They decided to Walk O'Neil to get at Bagby who was pitching the game for us. What they didn't know was that Bagby was almost as good a hitter as he was a pitcher! And he hit a home run! And that made the score for the game seven to nothing.

~~At the beginning~~ When that happened, they took Mr. Grimes out and put in Clarence Mitchell. He was a left handed spitball pitcher. Had spitball pitchers in those days, you know. So that's the situation in the beginning of the fifth inning.

Kilfuff led off for a single for them, and another man singled to put runners on first and second. Then Mitchell comes up to bat. Well, in a situation like that, 7 - 0, you wouldn't expect them to bunt or try a hit and run or anything. They'd just hit away, we figured. Mitchell was a pretty good hitter. Right field hitter, pull it to right field.

So, with all that in mind, I figured to play deep for him, see? Not especially caring whether we got a double play or not, not playing close for that. We didn't need a double play, but we wanted to get the rally stopped. So I played deep. Way back on the grass. Well, he hit a line drive down second base, up in the air. I ran over and the impetus of the run let me leap up there and catch the ball with my left hand. Well, then I started ✓

to run for second cause, see I was running in that direction anyway and I could see that Killduff was running to third and he had his back to me, and I had that ball in my hand and figured he was a cinch. So I touched second base with my toe and looked to my left! Well! the guy was standing no more than two feet away from me. He just stood there! He came to a full stop, right there. Well, I just took one step and touched him ^{lightly} ~~right~~ on the shoulder and that was it.

See, I knew what had happened and what I was doing all the time, though the fans in the stands didn't catch on for a minute or two. Reason I knew whas that when I joined the club in 1914, that had been just two years after a Cleveland player by the name of Neil Ball had made the first modern unassisted triple play in big league history. And he was a Cleveland player and all the ~~fix~~ fellows knew him and told the play all the time. He made it almost the same way, except he was playing short and caught a line drive at short and touched second and trapped the guy running from first for the third out. So they had been talking about unassisted triple plays for a long time there in Cleveland.

Happened so suddenly though, that a lot of the fans had to stop and figure just how many were out. Then, of course, it dawned on them and you could hear the cheers getting louder and louder. They all threw

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their straw hats right onto the playing field!

And my teammates. Well, they all patted me on the back and Speaker
outfield
came out from the ~~dugout~~ and says, well, that's one for the books, Bill.
Course after the game couldn't get out of the ball park. And all the
reporters. Just wanted to get a word. How'd it feel Bill, they all wanted
to know.

I think we made another run, but I could'nt for the life of me
tell you just how we made it. I do remember part of the ninth inning though.
On the 13th hit they got off of Bagby, they scored the one run that Bklyn
got the whole game. And the score for that game stands 8 to 1 !

They had another nine game series in '21, but at that time ~~Speaker~~
Landis
became Commissioner of Baseball (he was in '20 too) and the Yankees were
playing the Giants in New York. Well, they had a couple of rainouts and
that prolonged the series to about two weeks, so ~~they~~ well, we 'll
Judge Landis said
go back to a seven game series from now on.

Yes, I batted against a lot of spitballs. Batted against Coveleski
when I played with Boston.

No, I never did think I dould see the ball all the way to the bat
when I was hitting. But I know that a lot of the fellows said they did
see the ball actually hit the bat. Course I could usually tell, after years

of playing whether it was a curve ball coming in or not. Moment that it left the pitcher's hand you could tell whether it was going to be a curve or a fast ball , or something else.

When I came to Cleveland, there used to be a whiskey called "34". I got number 34 for the back of my uniform, you know, and I remember the boys in the bull pen riding me for the 34 on my back! But I had all different numbers. That was the one I had on my uniform when I'd just joined the ballclub.

But, oh my, at second base you can hear those fans very well. And it does affect you when you hear it. Like to hear that "Come on, Bill", but it's really the biggest mistake a ballplayer can make if he let's it affect him to the extent that he'll yell back, if they're on you, you know. For him to resent that openly, and make some gesture toward the fan, why that's a big mistake. You ~~may~~ may not offend the heckler , but the people sitting around the heckler, with the kindest intentions towards you, may see you making those motions down there that you resent this heckling and all. Well, that begins to offend you, now won't it. Now, what 's the ~~matter with him letting this guy get his~~ matter with him letting this guy get his goat that way, you'd think. No, that's a big mistake. You got to take it and never let the fan know if there's any inward resentment or anything. ✓