

## **Harry Simmons: His Contributions to Canadian Baseball**

### **Introduction**

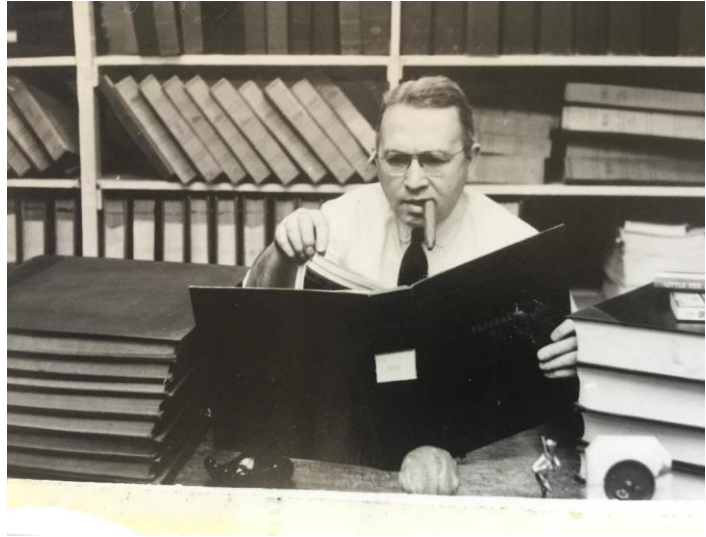
My father, Harry Simmons, was a baseball executive, writer, and historian.

I will begin my talk with a brief description of my Dad's career in baseball, followed by some memories of mine of growing up in Montreal in a baseball environment. I will then describe my Dad's influence on Canadian baseball, and finally, I will talk about the origin and contents of the Harry Simmons Collection which is in The Harry Simmons Library at the Canadian Baseball Hall of Fame.

### **Harry Simmons' Career**

In his youth, Dad was a fan of the N.Y. Giants because he could walk to the Polo Grounds from where his family lived in New York City, and consequently attended many games there. During the depression in the 1930s, like many men his age, he was frequently unemployed. He spent his free time in the New York Public Library and discovered its large holdings of old sporting newspapers, books and magazines. Through his study he developed a deep interest in baseball

history, rules, and statistics. In the Library he met and developed a friendship with baseball historian Ernest Lanigan, then the Information Director of the International League. Lanigan introduced Dad to the major baseball writers of the day, such as Taylor Spink, Hy Turkin and Lee Allen. Dad was soon doing research for these writers, and contributing original articles to *The Sporting News* and *Baseball Magazine*. In honour of Lanigan, I was given the middle name Ernest.



During World War II Dad was drafted into the U.S. army and served as a staff sergeant doing office work. When Ernie Lanigan was appointed the curator of the National Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown in 1945 he recommended my Dad for his old job at the International League. My Dad worked there from 1945 until 1966, first in New York then in Montreal. He then worked in the Baseball Commissioner's office until his retirement in 1982. He passed away in 1998 at the age of 90.

One of Dad's tasks at the International League was to come up with the playing schedule for the 8-team league. He enjoyed doing this challenging puzzle

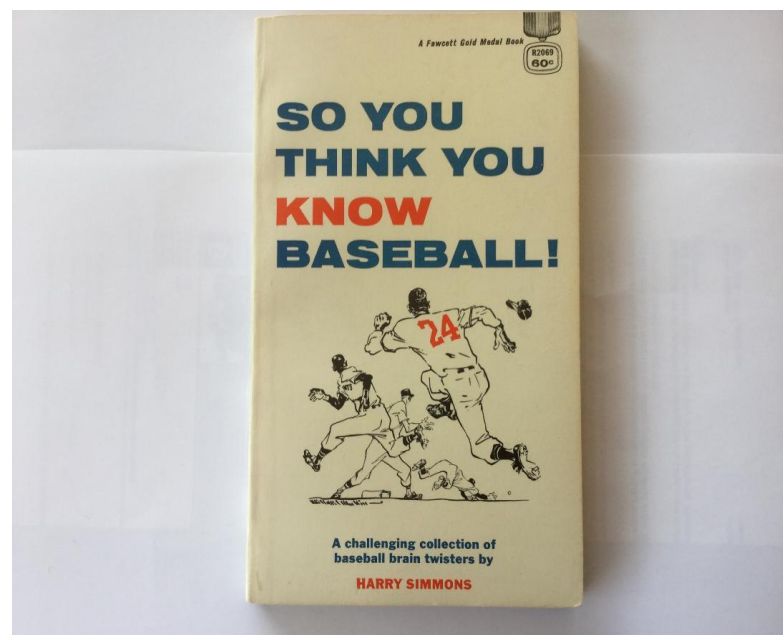
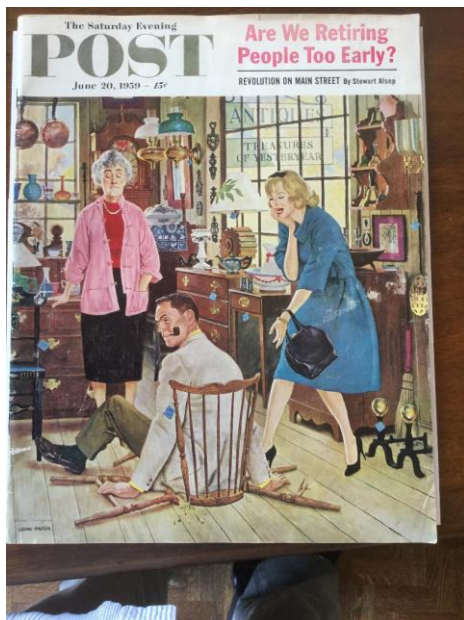


which was so difficult in the days before computers. In March 1953 the Boston Braves announced that they were moving the team to



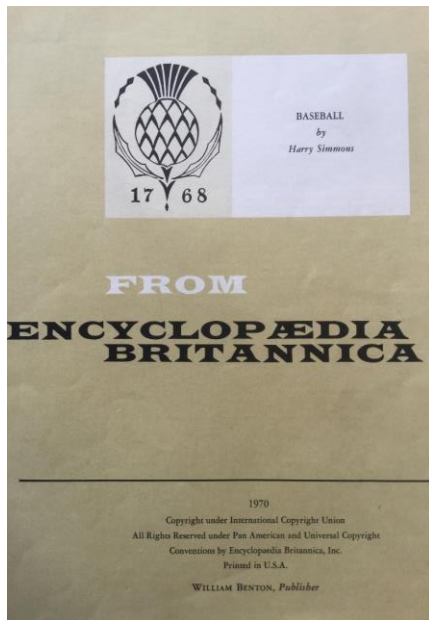
Milwaukee just before the start of the season. In those days the teams all travelled by train, and this move from Boston to Milwaukee would be not be possible without some scheduling changes. Warren Giles, then President of the National League, knew of my Dad's skill and called on him to examine the change of venue. Dad studied the problem and quickly recommended that the Braves take on the Pittsburgh schedule, with the Pirates assuming the old Braves schedule. This turned out to be a brilliant solution, and soon afterwards both the American and National Leagues asked Dad to develop their full league schedules for the 1954 season. He became the Major League schedule maker every year until 1982 when the required travel started to take its toll on him.

Another task at the International League was the hiring, firing and supervision of League umpires. He would hold conferences for the umpires to discuss the rules and to review calls which they had made. They would call him up to ask about some of the unusual plays on which they had to rule. Dad compiled a collection of such plays and in 1949 submitted a package of them to the then popular magazine *The Saturday Evening Post* under the heading "So You Think You Know Baseball!" along with the proper calls. The series was wildly



popular, and as a result Dad was asked to write a weekly article in the magazine, which he did until 1961. One of the articles was so controversial that it drew 7,000 letters of protest to the magazine. These articles led to many changes to the rules of baseball and Dad was later asked to serve on the Major League Rules Committee. It was at this time that he became known as "Mr. Baseball". The





series was printed in many editions in book form beginning in 1962, selling over 500,000 copies.

For many years Dad wrote the entry for baseball in the Encyclopedia Britannica. In 1951, he testified as an expert witness to the Celler Committee hearings in Congress on the history of the reserve clause, which at the time tied players to their teams after player contracts expired. At the 1979 baseball winter meeting in Toronto, he was honored as "King of Baseball", and in 2002 he was inducted into the Canadian Baseball Hall of Fame.

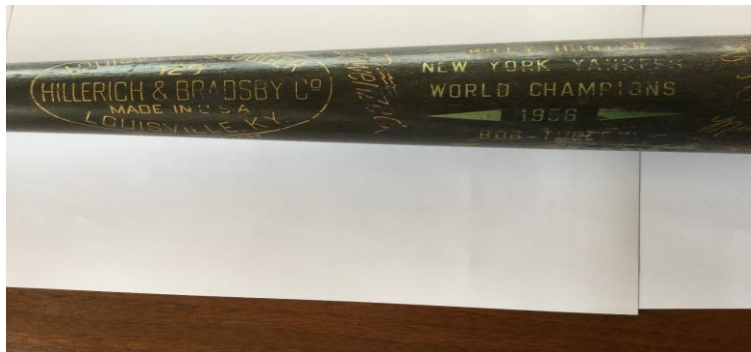
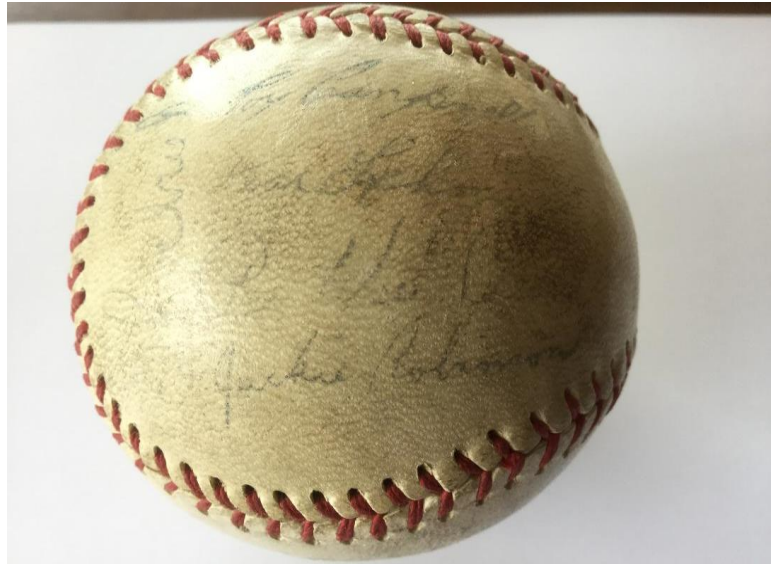
### **Memories of Growing up in a Baseball Family**

In 1953, League President Frank Shaughnessy moved the League office to his home town of Montreal. Dad left our family in New York as he arranged to set up life in Canada. In the middle of the winter of 1954 he came down and took the family by train to the house he had rented for us. For two days before we arrived there had been one of those enormous snowfalls which Montreal was famous for in those days. One of my earliest memories is arriving by taxi to the house and my Dad carrying each of his four children through the deep snow to the front door. By 1956 Dad had decided to make Montreal his home, and he purchased a house in the Cartierville district which would be his home until 1995.

Dad was frequently away attending scheduling or league meetings, and attending All-Star and World Series games. He accumulated an enormous amount of baseball collectibles from these trips, and the house soon became like a baseball museum full of player-signed baseballs and bats, club-issued plates, lighters, clocks, watches, hundreds of press pins, passes and the large railway schedule books which he used in scheduling. Our home telephone was always ringing with calls from sports writers, the General Managers of the teams and baseball executives.



Across the street from the house was a field where the neighbour kids and I used to play baseball. Once when I was maybe 8 years old, the ball which we were using fell apart. I said that I would get a new ball from home and ran across the street to fetch one. I grabbed the first ball that I saw and ran back to continue the action. We batted it around when one of the older boys picked it up and came over to me saying that there were signatures on the ball and maybe we should not be playing with it. I actually brought this ball in today to show you. Now let me see if I can still read those worn signatures. Here's Jackie Robinson's name; there's Sandy Koufax; oh and Duke Snider and Roy Campanella. Yes here is a used signed ball from the 1955 Brooklyn Dodgers!



And another used item that I've brought along today is this 1956 Yankees World Champion souvenir bat: Mickey Mantle, Yogi Berra, Whitey Ford and Casey Stengel!

Another memory which may be of interest was of my first visit to Toronto in 1965. In 1964 Jack Kent Cooke sold the Toronto Maple Leafs to two stock promoters, Bob Hunter and Sam Starr, for \$50,000. The two new owners lacked Cooke's promotional abilities, so the team attendance down by the lake was very low and they soon ran into financial difficulties. My Dad had set up a meeting with the board of the club at the end of the 1965 season to discuss their problems, and he took me along. We arrived on a Sunday afternoon in time to see the last game of the season in which the Maple Leafs won the Governor's Cup. The owners and board members had a bit of a celebration in the offices of

the club, and afterwards Bob Hunter announced that he was going to take us all out for dinner to continue the celebration.

Now this was Toronto in 1965, and not much was open on Sundays in those days. Hunter said that he thought the Victoria Room at the King Edward Hotel would be open for dinner, so Dad and I joined Hunter in his large Cadillac for the drive to the hotel. There were about 10 of us including Starr and Percy Gardiner, who was on the board. When we arrived at the hotel the ornate Victoria dining room was just closing and they would not seat us. The maitre d' said that their staff was getting ready to go home. Hunter and Gardiner were quite wealthy and they were used to getting their way. I saw Hunter take a large roll of bills out of his pocket and my 15-year-old eyes looked on in amazement as money changed hands and we were then seated and dined in that fabulous room with a dinner I will always remember.

### **The Development of the Montreal Expos**

The International League office was in the old Holland Building on Ste. Catherine Street in Montreal. I looked into the building last May and it hasn't changed a lot, but now has a hotel on the top floors. I have fond memories of looking out the front window to see the lively action on Ste. Catherine Street in the 1950s. It was a 4-

room office for Shaughnessy, my Dad, their secretary and a storage area. There was a spittoon holding the door open in Shaughnessy's office. When the office closed in 1960 we took a lot of the furniture to our home; I still have my Dad's and Shaughnessy's desks and a lamp in my apartment.



One of the characters who hung out around the office was named Jockey Flemming. He was a bookie who hung out at the corner of Peel and Ste. Catherine Streets, taking his bets for Blue Bonnets Raceway or for a big game in hockey or baseball. I still remember Flemming and my Dad talking in Yiddish about the sporting world.

During the 1950s and 60s, every Friday night, when my Dad was in town, he would attend a dinner of men who were involved in the Montreal baseball world in one of the large restaurants along Decarie Boulevard. In attendance would be Rene Lemyre, who had been GM of the Royals and was active in baseball circles in Quebec, Jean Barrette, who had been president of the Quebec Provincial League and later a member of the Quebec Legislature, Jim Grey of the Bank of Nova Scotia, and members of the press such as Dink Carroll of the *Gazette* and Lloyd McGowan of the *Star*. I believe that the origins of the Montreal Expos came from the interaction of this group. In 1962, Gerry Snyder, who was Mayor Jean Drapeau's right-hand man, proposed that Montreal should have a major league team and that the city should spend \$15,000,000 on a stadium. I have a letter from 1962 in which Jean Barrette, who was a member of the Athletic Commission of the city along with Snyder, asked my Dad to arrange a meeting between Mayor Drapeau and Ford Frick, the then Commissioner of Baseball, to see what Montreal's chances were for a major league team. Apparently, the Mayor was a no-show for the meeting, which caused great embarrassment for my Dad.

In the next few years Gerry Snyder worked directly with my Dad on how to go about getting a team, and who would be best to hire to manage the team. I have a vivid memory of a large limo pulling up in front of our house carrying Gerry Snyder in the back seat. Apparently Snyder used this car as his office; he did not want to come into the house. My Dad went out to the car and had a long talk with Snyder about the proposed team. Snyder asked Dad to visit the old Delorimier Downs Stadium where the Royals had played to see if it was at all possible to use it as a major league venue. In 1964, on a Sunday afternoon he took me to a Montreal Rifles football game. This was a short-lived team in the United Football League who played at the old ball park. The park had not been used for a few years and was in bad shape, with half of its seats missing. It was a terrible venue for football. But my Dad enjoyed the outing and seeing the old ball park again. Some of the billboards were still in the outfield. My Dad pointed out

with joy that the ad for a Mens' Clothing store was still visible. The sign had a circled hole on it which stated that if a player hit a home run through the hole he would get a free suit from the store! After the game, Dad had a meeting with the owner of the team, Johnny Newman, to discuss the condition of the stadium. The players had to walk off the field and up the stairs of the seats of the stadium to get to their temporary change room. We walked into the change room for the meeting and Dad asked me to wait outside because the players were in the shower. The stadium was torn down in 1969 to make way for a high school.

Because of his involvement he was asked if he wished to invest in the new team. Dad considered investing in the venture but after some discussions he decided it might be seen as a conflict of interest with his scheduling work.

From 1966 my Dad was working in the Commissioner's Office, and there worked with John McHale who joined in 1967 and Jim Fanning who came aboard in 1968. Dad discussed the new team with McHale and Fanning and then introduced them to Snyder. In this way my Dad was quite involved in the development of the Expos. I have a letter of thanks from Snyder for Dad's help after the franchise was awarded.

### **The Harry Simmons Library at the Canadian Baseball Hall of Fame**

I'm sure that a lot of people who visit the Canadian Baseball Hall of Fame ask themselves how a Jewish fellow from the Bronx, who was born in 1907 and never came near a small town in southwestern Ontario, came to have a library in St. Marys named after him?

My Dad was a bit of a hoarder and never threw anything out, including old telephone bills, bank statements, tax forms, and personal letters, including many written during his service during World War II. He also saved all his correspondence from his 60-year involvement in baseball, including original research work, letters from his work on the Major League schedules, letters from fans of the "So You Think You Know Baseball!" series, and files of letters from the International League and from his time in the Office of the Commissioner of Baseball. There were also thousands of baseball items, including books, journals, magazines, pins, souvenir bats, many league passes and newspaper articles clipped from various papers. Unfortunately all of the above was piled together in many boxes in the house and at a storage locker that we rented. When he



became ill in 1996 and he had to go to a nursing home, it was my job to sort through all this stuff. I just threw it all in about 70 large storage boxes and maybe 100 large garbage bags. I then rented a truck and drove back to Toronto where it was all stored in the basement of my house.

Fortunately, my neighbour from across the street, Stephen Fisher, was quite interested in baseball; together, for about two months, we went through all the boxes and sorted out all the personal items, itemizing everything of value in a spreadsheet. It was a big job. I then started to look for a home for the collection. I first approached the National Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown and interviewed with the President and the Curator there. The collection there was overwhelming with professional research facilities, climate controlled storage and an amazing display of items in the Hall. The president personally knew my Dad from his work with the Commissioner's Office, and the Curator knew of Dad's original research. They were extremely interested in getting hold of Dad's research items and the correspondence. They also promised a special exhibit on my Dad. But, of course, they already had copies of most of the books and journals and because of the richness of their holdings, the historical items would probably never be shown in their museum. I decided to look elsewhere.

Next I drove to St. Marys to see the new Canadian Baseball Hall of Fame, which had just opened a very small museum in an old farm house away from the town. They had practically no books or journals and no research facilities, with just a basement to store items not on display. I met with Carl McCoomb, an amiable retired fellow from London, Ontario who was acting as the curator of the new museum. He had not heard of my Dad but certainly knew of the "So You Think You Know Baseball!" series from the *Saturday Evening Post*. When I described his accomplishments and then showed him the spreadsheet of the collection he was overwhelmed! We arranged for him to see the holdings in Toronto and he actually made many trips to help us out in the final sorting of the items in my basement. I became friendly with Carl and his wife Rose, and visited them at their home in London. Later, after the donation was completed, Carl and Rose would spend hundreds of hours on the collection, preparing an itemized evaluation and arranging for some of the items to be shown in the museum.

I liked the people involved in the St. Marys museum, and I also liked their vision of what it could become, but it was a big risk since they lacked the proper facilities and the professional staff to handle such a collection. I then started negotiating with the board of the museum to donate the collection and I stated only one condition: to name a future library after Dad, to which they agreed. They sent a convoy of five SUVs to pick up the collection in December 1998 and now, 21 years later, it is all being held in the new Harry Simmons Memorial Library which we will visit this afternoon.



I wish to conclude by reading a quote from Jim Fanning, former General Manager of the Expos, who wrote: "During Mr. Simmons' time as a baseball executive every Major League owner and executive knew him on a first name basis. He not only was a keen advisor to the Commissioners he worked for, but was a counsel and advisor to Major League Executives as well. Mr. Simmons was



unheralded - his picture never made the cover of *The Sporting News* - but I had an office next to his when I started the Major League Scouting Bureau, and I witnessed this man's contribution day after day. His contributions were an equal to any who graced the cover of a sports magazine."

David Simmons  
November 2019