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Roberts Ehrgott

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MR. WRIGLEY'S BALL CLUB

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MR. WRIGLEY'S BALL CLUB

CHICAGO & THE CUBS
DURING THE JAZZ AGE

Roberts Ehr Gott

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Ehrgott, Roberts, 1951–

Mr. Wrigley's ball club: Chicago and the Cubs during
the jazz age / Roberts Ehrgott.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-8032-6478-6 (cloth: alk. paper) 1. Chicago
Cubs (Baseball team)—History. 2. Chicago (Ill.)—
History—20th century. 3. Chicago (Ill.)—Social life
and customs. I. Title.

GV875.C6E37 2013

796.357'640977311—dc23 2012039457

Set in Fournier MT Pro by Laura Wellington.

Designed by A. Shahan.

This book is dedicated to Susan Malone Ehrgott, a lifelong resident of Chicago's North Side and a Ladies Day veteran who took me to my first Major League game.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The following individuals were all willing to help freely with information and advice: Bob Allen, George Brace, Michael Emmerich, Col. John P. Fitzgerald, Nolan Gottlieb, Stephen S. Gottlieb, Sharon Hankinson, Charles E. Herman, Sheila Hartnett Hornof, Mark Jacob, John Kiesewetter, Dr. H. Hoffman Groskloss, Frederick A. Krehbiel, Forrest Docenus Jensen, Edward Linn, Leonard R. Merullo, Joseph G. Moore, Andy Pafko, Clyde Partin, Daniel J. J. Ross, Robert C. Root, E. R. “Salty” Saltwell, Marla L. Sayers, Riggs Stephenson II, Riggs Stephenson III, Barbara Strangeman, Jeffrey R. Twyman, and Mike Veeck.

The Chicago Historical Society, the Chicago National League Ball Club, the *Chicago Sun-Times*, the National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum, the *Sporting News*, and the Wells Library at Indiana University–Bloomington all furnished me with outstanding service and cooperation.

Special thanks go to the University of Nebraska Press and staff and to my agents, Lukas Ortiz and Philip Spitzer, two men I cannot thank enough.

Finally, I must acknowledge the extraordinary patience and understanding of Lynne and Nicholas Ehr Gott.

I || The Capital of Baseball

Chicago's bid for grandeur has failed. . . . [Chicago], it now seems certain, will never be first. —A. J. Liebling, *Chicago: The Second City*, 1952

“Chicago is still the second city.” —John Lindsay, mayor of New York, 1969

The bases were loaded with two outs in the home eleventh inning at Wrigley Field on September 13, 1931, while the crowd roared for the sacrifice of the solitary youngster standing at the center of the diamond. The threats to that forlorn figure, Boston pitcher Bruce Cunningham, had mounted batter by batter: a one-out double, an intentional walk, then a desperate lunge by the second baseman to stop a sharp drive and hold the Cubs' lead runner at third base. The right-handed Cunningham intentionally walked the next batter through the inning, filling the last available base. Cunningham now had to record an out, any out, by strikes, force, fly, or tag to preserve the 7–7 tie. Cunningham in particular needed this stop. The howling of the Wrigley mob may have been only a vicarious release, but Cunningham, 3–11 on the year after three unremarkable seasons in the big leagues, might soon need to find another livelihood, and there weren't many of those available in late 1931.

The opposing teams on this bright September afternoon were a collective fifty games or so from first place; only the Cubs' need to remain in the first division to share in World Series proceeds provided any plausible suspense, yet thirty-three thousand Chicagoans howled as if the pennant were on the line. The third-place Cubs—17½ games from first place and mathematically eliminated from contention, and the perennially down-trodden Braves, 7–24 in the last month—nonetheless faced a crowd whose size the 1930 World Series had not matched. Cunningham and the sixth-place Braves were fortunate if they saw so many Boston fans in a full week. In fact, that afternoon in Boston, the two Sox teams were playing before

seven thousand; Redland Field in Cincinnati had attracted just eight thousand fans. New York City could claim more fans for the day, but with two mostly empty venues: ten thousand at Brooklyn's Ebbets Field, and twenty-five thousand at Yankee Stadium, supposedly more than seventy thousand in capacity.

Seven other major league parks with empty seats and blasé late-season customers, yet young Cunningham had to pitch in the epicenter of a sports madhouse, before a hoarse rabble in full cry for the 143rd game of a home team also-ran. Still, in the capital of baseball a half-dozen radio stations and their hundreds of thousands of listeners were following each pitch and every play of the Cubs' eleventh—the one-out double by Les Bell, two intentional walks, the second baseman's marvelous stop.¹

Across the sprawling city the announcers' voices squawked through windows and doors still open in the warm late-summer afternoon, down quiet side streets and alleys, inside stores and barbershops and the ice cream parlors that fronted for the ready availability of beer. No other program—no music, no comedy, no soap opera, no news—aired during the Cub game. The flat Midwestern deliveries of the play-by-play men were the common denominator of a city where sociologists had recorded the presence of at least twenty-eight spoken tongues. The broadcasts reached not just the 7 million residents of "Chicagoland"—the city and its suburbs—but an audience of millions more in a six-state swatch of the upper Midwest. Cub games had created the world's first electronic village, a daily monopoly of the airwaves rivaled at first only by the World Series, heavyweight title fights, presidential inaugurations, and appearances of Charles Lindbergh.²

Confounding the scoffers who predicted that this total broadcast immersion would cripple the ball club's attendance, the Cubs' radio coverage had touched off the greatest boom since the arrival of Babe Ruth in New York more than a decade earlier. By 1931 the capital of baseball had outdrawn the "House That Ruth Built" four summers running. Two years earlier, in the last halcyon summer of the Roaring Twenties, Mr. Wrigley's turnstiles had recorded 1.5 million visits, more than the major leagues would see until the Depression and World War II had run their course. Despite the ever-deepening Depression and the club's unexpected fall from contention, Wrigley Field's 1931 attendance count handily exceeded,

at 974,688, anything most teams had dreamt of in the fattest years of the Jazz Age. Each year in this new capital of baseball, one of every four National League customers passed through Mr. Wrigley's turnstiles.³

The crowds of this boom time might storm the gates and even the field in midgame; express disgust or jubilation by littering the field with pop bottles, fruit, or straw hats; and watch the rise and fall of fabled careers and batting records. Friend or foe found himself razzed or cheered according to standards that shifted as quickly as the breezes off Lake Michigan, a few blocks to the east. But at any moment a hero or a villain could turn things around with a lovely wind-blown drive into the right-field bleachers, a county fair-style structure of scaffolding and planks whose first row met the playing field behind a cyclone fence only 320 feet from home plate, the famous ivy-clad walls yet unforeseen. After Labor Day, especially in the heat of a pennant race, a decisive home run signaled a seasonal ritual: flinging the passing summer's straw hats—"skimners"—onto the field with a flick of the wrist, a Jazz Age Frisbee toss that jumbled the field with mounds of hats and halted games while the ground crew hauled them off.⁴

The noise could reach its highest decibels in the bedlam of the Cubs' unprecedented Ladies Day carnivals, when the complimentary admission of women left proportionately many fewer men on hand. Wrigley Field's female fans were the most numerous and enthusiastic assortment of sports-women yet witnessed in the modern world. Reaching numbers of twenty thousand and higher, their riotous Friday afternoon presence often dwarfed the day's paid attendance in any other major league park. The women poured into the ballpark every Friday the Cubs played at home, applauded foul balls enthusiastically, adopted and discarded favorites, and hounded the chosen ones for autographs; the boldest flappers forwarded their phone numbers to the dugouts. Massing in the streets outside the park, willing to charge the gates if necessary, Chicago's womenfolk had forced management to adopt an elaborate advance distribution system to cope with the onrush.

Saturdays and Sundays brought yet more women, this time paying customers who had learned baseball on Friday afternoons or by listening to the broadcasts during household chores and now attended with spouses and families. Aided by the female reinforcements, the park sold out fre-

quently on weekends, and latecomers, in their Sunday best, might have to settle for standing-room-only admission, lining up behind ropes that Andy Frain's resplendent, paramilitary ushers stretched deep in the outfield, sweltering under the summer sun—up to four thousand souls, a typical weekday figure in several other major league parks.

While the bleachers and the overflow teemed with the humble and the late arriving, the grandstands held a cross-section of Jazz Age Chicago. Amid a sea of straw hats, the inevitable flask of moonshine liquor, perhaps produced by a snappy dresser wearing spats, emerged, and from time to time knots of hard-faced men in snap-brimmed panamas invaded the box seats, the kingpin of the moment safely in their midst.⁵

Most games though, the inhabitant of another box, just behind the Cubs' dugout along the third-base line, commanded attention. There, three or four days each week during the club's lengthy home stands and his own visits to his privately owned 58,000-acre Pacific island, sat the team's chief cheerleader, a double-chinned older gentleman clad in bowtie, three-piece suit, and expensive skimmer: William Wrigley Jr.—“Bill” only to the public, never to his face—a free-spending overachiever, dreamt of owning the greatest baseball team in the world. A perfectionist, he monitored the condition of his plant in minute detail, ever vigilant for the signs of dirt or disorder, insistent that even his team's uniforms were the pride of the major leagues. Not shy about leaping to his feet for an exciting play or proudly passing out cigars after a home run, he monitored his prized athletic thoroughbreds up close, pampered them, encouraged them. In the six years since Mr. Wrigley had retired from active control of his eponymous company, the world's premier seller of chewing gum, Mr. Wrigley's ball club and the great surge in attendance had caught the baseball world by surprise, complete with the Ladies Day crowds SRO and sellouts, not to mention frequent hurling of hats and fruit. Wrigley, in close alliance with his trusted baseball man, William Veeck Sr., snapped up athletes as he had his semitropical island—Santa Catalina Island, floating like a cloud off the southern California coast, where he presided while his players trained each February and March, the lord of an estate inspecting his chattel, feeding and sheltering them, sponsoring their honeymoons, providing them entertainment and introductions to Hollywood's stars, starlets, producers, and agents.⁶

Wrigley made sure no payroll in the National League exceeded his and that his expensive player acquisitions made a splash in the newspapers. After years of extravagant offers and dealings, his top sluggers earned as much as Lou Gehrig (though not Babe Ruth himself). Wrigley's charges owned large stretches of the record book untrod by even the Bambino of New York. Mr. Wrigley openly hankered to own the greatest ball club in the world, and he would see that they played in its baseball capital.⁷

By September 1931 Wrigley's promotions, his ambitions, his hirings and firings, his dissatisfaction with ordinary definitions of success, had created a participatory baseball democracy in which the humblest fan expected a say and a ball club that occupied a central place in the national conversation. The shirt-sleeved folk booing in Mr. Wrigley's ballpark were a cloud on the horizon, harbingers of change—soon to become foot soldiers in something called the New Deal, when the culture would turn on Bill Wrigley's chums and allies—Hoover, Coolidge, Big Bill Thompson, Samuel Insull, Andrew Mellon. The voters would eject them from the seats of power, and an army of business regulators and prosecutors would treat them much as they did the murderous Al Capone, going to trial downtown in a few weeks. Wrigley's death, only four months off, would spare him this spectacle. His son and successor, the reticent, cautious Philip, would personify a new business paradigm, conserving as well as acquiring, stepping carefully, avoiding flamboyant risk-taking and braggadocio.

In September 1931, none of that was obvious, or inevitable. Depression or not, pennant race or not, Wrigley's customers were out in force on a warmish Sunday afternoon, on the edge of their seats, still following every twist of their team's fortunes and its politics. That said, the wild pennant races of the past three Septembers had not repeated themselves in 1931; the streets around the ballpark were no longer blocked with ticket seekers, no temporary bleachers were going up for a World Series, and the more recent losses and disappointments and controversies were yet fresh in the minds of Cubs' fans. That itself was not necessarily good news for Wrigley and his favorite Cub.

Pat Pieper, the Cubs' field announcer, was surprised to see the Cubs' player-manager, Rogers Hornsby, calling his on-deck batter back to the

dugout. It seemed an odd move: the scheduled batter was a capable hitter and a favorite of Hornsby's—why not let him face the right-handed Cunningham?

Pieper had been at his job ever since the Cubs moved into the park in 1916. His main tool was a green, fourteen-pound megaphone that measured some three feet long and eighteen inches across at the bell; an assistant helped him tote it down each foul line and bellow the lineup changes to the grandstands and box seats. The bleacher customers, not to mention the reporters in the press box, had to cup their ears or rely on word of mouth to keep track of changes. Trying to read the back of a player's uniform was no help, for the Cubs had not yet adopted numbered jerseys.⁸

Yet before Pieper could reach his first station, even the bleacher dwellers recognized who had swaggered from the dugout, swinging two bats over his head. For Cunningham, high on the mound, it was a disconcerting sight: wielding the bats was Mr. Wrigley's prize superstar, the Cubs' leading RBI man, their player-manager, and by most lights, the greatest right-handed hitter who had ever stepped into a major league box. As the club's player-manager, Hornsby was the self-same party who had decided that in this instance baseball's lefty-righty rule need not apply.⁹

Little that Cunningham and the Braves had experienced prepared them to see thousands of angry customers leaping to their feet as one, shaking fists and jeering; then came a spirited reply loudly approving the manager's choice. Cunningham might have harked back to the ancient history lessons still taught in that day, Blues and Greens demonstrating in the imperial Circus, factions that could turn on their fellow citizens—or upon the imperial box itself. Civil war had broken out in the capital of baseball. While Pieper tried to announce the expensive pinch hitter through his cone, the great Rajah, taking no heed of the commotion, strode to the batter's box, stepped in, and coolly awaited Cunningham's first delivery.¹⁰

With the bases full, Cunningham was free to take his full windup again. Hornsby let the first pitch go by, a called strike. He did not complain; umpire baiting was not among his faults, and for someone of his stature in the business, star and umpire more or less collaborated on the scope of the strike zone. The stone-faced Texan presented Cunningham and all pitchers with unique problems. Thrice a .400 hitter, owner of one of the

highest career batting averages ever, he had done the most, aside from Ruth himself, to launch baseball's Golden Age, the era of the lively ball. But unlike Ruth and others of the new breed, he represented the old order in both his attitudes and his play; off the field, he was surly and cold—"wintry-souled," in the words of one historian—to rivals and teammates alike, though assuredly not to Mr. Wrigley. Disciplined and relentless, the Rajah never overswung or forced himself to pull the ball for distance; at all times he was willing to take pitches to the opposite field. "There's only one batting rule," he said. "Keep your eye on the ball."¹¹

As long as a warm lakeward breeze cooperated, the dimensions of Wrigley Field, with its right-field bleachers some 320 feet off, favored an opposite-field hitter like Hornsby. On a pleasant day like September 13, 1931, any overgrown fly ball could reach those bleachers.

Chicago in 1931 was still a turbulent boomtown, the country's most diverse in the years after World War I. After the startling half-century of growth that followed the great fire of 1871, its population had mushroomed another 25 percent in the 1920s. Those born abroad and their children made up two-thirds of the city's population: "the largest Lithuanian city in the world" or "the third largest Irish city in the world," depending on who was counting. Many other inhabitants hailed from farms or small towns in the hinterlands of the Midwest and the South. Chicagoans, said one who knew them well, were the type who "eat with a knife instead of a fork, who take a bath on Saturday night, who play an occasional game of pinochle, and who cuss at the traffic cop who doesn't let them park in the Loop." Many lived in apartments or shotgun-style cold-water flats; even those with hot water might bathe no more than once or twice a week. Après bath, even the best-scrubbed fan had only perfume or cologne for further defense: deodorants and antiperspirants were not yet in widespread use—making the sights and smells of Wrigley Field's bleachers, to consider one example, even more problematic.¹²

Chicagoans of that description filled the right-field bleachers, and the similar, if much smaller "jury box" in left-center field; physically and socially the bleacherites resided far from William Wrigley's box seat. Between the two bleacher sections loomed the scoreboard, topped by the only advertising Wrigley allowed in the park: the Wrigley Doublemint twins. A space

on the bleacher planks cost 50 cents (about \$5 in today's money); for those not within walking distance, it took another 7 cents' streetcar fare or 10 cents to take the Northwestern El to the Addison Street stop.¹³

It was a trek the West Siders made willingly and cheerfully. For their first forty years the Cubs were a team of the Central and West Side districts, at the old Lakefront Stadium and the West Side Grounds. The team moved to the more affluent North Side only in 1916, after the renegade Federal League folded and the late, unlamented Chicago Whales franchise left behind a brand-new ballpark that proved much superior to its roster. Baseball on the North Side was a new experience for many Cub fans, quite a few of whom, in typical big-city fashion, seldom ventured so far outside their own tight-knit ethnic quarters, making transfers on the trolleys or the El. Ring Lardner of the *Chicago Tribune*, himself a North Sider, tried to describe the strange new land for his readership when the Whales opened for business in 1914: the new park, he explained, lay in a neighborhood "largely inhabited by Caucasians, otherwise it is very similar to ourselves." In particular, he noted, the familiar smell of the stockyards was missing.¹⁴

More than two decades earlier, in the glory days of the Tinker, Evers, and Chance infield, the Cubs had played south and west of the north branch of the Chicago River, another world from the North Side or the lakefront's glittering "City of the Future." There were scenes of startling squalor and grimness, rows of tottering wooden slum dwellings, crumbling nineteenth-century structures of cheap brick and stone, lots filled with debris.

At times all Chicagoans grow weary of the almost universal ugliness of Chicago and everyone sags. One feels it in the street, in the stores, in the homes. The bodies of the people sag and a cry seems to go up out of a million throats,—“we are set down here in this continual noise, dirt and ugliness. Why did you ever put us down here? There is no rest. We are always being hurried about from place to place, to no end. Millions of us live on the vast Chicago West Side, where all streets are equally ugly and where the streets go on and on forever, out of nowhere into nothing.”¹⁵

It might be added that in these environs, the Volstead Act, the law of the land that enforced alcohol prohibition, was anathema, and the city's

gangsters found the bulk of their recruits. To the south lay the neighborhoods of the Irish and the city's latest arrivals, blacks from the South. West were Bohemians, Jews, and more Irish; north and west, Polish, Swedish, and Germans. They bickered and fought, violated the Volstead Act, and bet on the horses. Gangs of young men, often fronting as athletic clubs, were dominated by members of each ethnic group. The Ragen Colts, an Irish sports club on the South Side, had led the horrific race riots of 1919. On the West Side, the Bohemians of Pilsen and the Jews of Lawndale squared off year after year, sometimes on the streets, sometimes on the playing field or the boxing ring.

Baseball, fights, and anything else sporting supported a bookmaking industry that flourished throughout the city. Betting was open in Wrigley Field's bleachers. It was in Chicago, after all, that professional gamblers had nearly brought baseball down by conspiring to throw the 1919 World Series, and that Judge Kenesaw Mountain Landis had begun his reign in 1921 by banning eight Chicago White Sox from baseball for their involvement in the scheme.¹⁶

Landis, himself a Progressive, good-government Republican like Wrigley, watched the developing Chicago scene of the 1920s without enthusiasm. The politicians of the 1920s, from the mayor and the state's attorney on down, aided and abetted—and in turn were aided and abetted by—a welter of booze-running, numbers-running, brothel-operating gangs. Mindful that a Chicago jury had found the Black Sox not guilty, Landis had no intention of letting this zeitgeist infect the sport he commanded. His harsh treatment of the Black Sox was proof of that. From his headquarters on Michigan Avenue, he tried to extend baseball's rules over the most likely connection to gamblers: horse-track betting. Many a ballplayer liked to spend his day off at the track; a few others—most conspicuously, Rogers Hornsby—could not resist laying their bets at the “handbooks” of Uptown, just to the north of the ballpark. The word on the street had it that Hornsby relayed his bets to the bookies while running his ball club from the dugout.¹⁷

For the time being Landis was limited to hectoring Hornsby about his bad habits and scheming against the evils of racetrack betting. But sports or betting had little to do with Chicago's most notorious law breaking. Nowhere had the inhabitants of a city more enthusiastically and frequently

defied Volstead Act enforcement. The results were the most spectacular of the Prohibition era. If Chicago did not pioneer bootlegging, speakeasies, illegal breweries, organized home stills, distribution networks, beer-truck smuggling, gang wars, police payoffs, and judicial corruption, the metropolis certainly became a showcase for these and a host of other symbols of the age. Chicago police estimated that hardly a block in the city lacked its two or three stills; the city harbored perhaps twenty thousand speakeasies. After the final out of each Cub game, the voice of Wrigley Field, Pat Pieper, strolled over to a neighborhood establishment where he moonlighted as a bartender.¹⁸

The bleacherites, a solid block of “wets” if ever there was one, had little use for the teetotaler William Wrigley had placed in charge of the Cubs: Rogers Hornsby. In addition, the transplanted Texan’s reputed membership in the Ku Klux Klan was no recommendation to ethnics or their sons and daughters. The Rajah held himself up as a nondrinking, nonsmoking role model—and then signed on as the national spokesman for a brand of cigarettes. The fans had also heard how the Rajah, who judged others in the harshest ways, welshed on his gambling debts.¹⁹

No, long before William Wrigley had brought the Rajah into his baseball paradise, the bleacher folk had adopted a very different Cub as their hero. The people’s choice was no teetotaler, no pedestal climber, but all too human, lusty, short, exuberant, always ready to solve problems with his fists or a home run. He was Hack Wilson, the working-class idol of Chicago in the Roaring Twenties, the rough-and-ready, self-made embodiment of the blue-collar success story.²⁰

On the afternoon of September 13, 1931, though, Wilson was absent from the park he had so often held in his thrall. The week before, Hornsby had stripped him of his Cub uniform and suspended him for the season and closed the clubhouse to him. Now the Hacker was making the long drive back to his home in the panhandle of West Virginia. Hack Wilson would never again wear a Cub uniform in the ballpark he had thrilled and generally captivated for half a decade, and that was the real problem as Hornsby stepped into the batter’s box to face Bruce Cunningham.

Almost exactly a year before Wilson’s departure, the bleacher residents, and most other Cub fans, had protested another drastic management order, the sacking of Hornsby’s predecessor, Joe McCarthy. That hard-drinking

Irishman, Wilson's mentor and faithful ally, had committed the sin of standing in Rogers Hornsby's career path. Now, the fans thought, fun-loving Hack was gone for the sin of being himself—being like them.²¹

The stands were still in an uproar. Cunningham delivered his 0-1 pitch, which came in on the outside corner of the plate. True to his maxims, the Rajah swung cleanly and met the ball with the end of his bat. With a sharp crack of contact, it soared toward right field above Wes Schulmerich, the Braves' stocky right fielder, who retreated to the high wire-mesh fence that separated the field from the bleachers, turned, and leaped as high as he could, in vain. The ball sailed untouched into the bleacher crowd, a grand slam, the 294th home run of Hornsby's storied career, and surely the most contested. The Cubs' starter, Charlie Root, would get credit for the 11-7 victory, an eleven-inning complete game. Not much more than a year later, Babe Ruth would deal with him as Hornsby had Cunningham. At least Root could look forward to another decade of paychecks from one of the wealthiest teams in the major leagues; Bruce Cunningham, two weeks shy of his twenty-sixth birthday and toiling for one of the neediest teams in the league, had incurred his 12th loss of the year, against 3 victories. Less than a year remained in his major league career.²²

Hornsby had emphatically finished both the game and the game within the game. The Rajah circled the bases briskly, while his crestfallen foes slumped, one by one, against their seatbacks. The Hornsby faction among the crowd, emboldened, flung a small blizzard of straw hats near the plate.²³ The base runners Hornsby had plated waited to congratulate their boss. Hornsby accepted their handshakes matter-of-factly. Then, picking his way through the boaters scattered about, he headed for the open gangway under the stands that connected the dugout to the clubhouse. Well-wishers might try without luck to intercept him on the way. There was a second game to be played that day, and Hornsby had to tend to his pregame routine. Among other matters, he decided that his game-winning pinch hitter was done for the day.²⁴

Hornsby had crushed the revolt for the time being, but the days that a gimpy thirty-five-year-old could quell a mob with his heroics were growing short, no matter the batting records. If the obvious dislike of so many

fans bothered Hornsby, he had given no sign of it throughout the difficult 1931 season. He had the unqualified support, even the adulation, of William Wrigley, who had called Hornsby “the smartest manager and baseball player that ever lived.” Even Bill Veeck, the team’s urbane and unflappable president, seemed to be in his corner.²⁵

Wrigley and Veeck had chosen Hornsby as manager to rid the club of the excesses of the McCarthy era, the days of the fatted calf, the giddy 1920s: veterans setting their own hours and their own training rules, sometimes spending the night in jail, miring themselves in litigation with their exploits, and then taking the field overconfident, nonchalant—and often hung over. Such men and such habits, Hornsby and Wrigley believed, had cost the club the 1929 World Series, certainly the 1930 pennant, and the hangover was holding the club down again in 1931. After years of success the club had become ridden with autograph hounds and publicity seekers: Wilson posing with all manner of admirers, he and his teammates pursued by the crowds of small boys or the female Chicagoans who swamped the park, or even gangsters.²⁶

Hornsby had spent the summer alternately benching and platooning Wilson and other McCarthy favorites. He even set about restructuring the free-swinging batting style of Wilson, who had set the single-season National League home run and the major league RBI marks the year before. In the second half of 1931 Hornsby began playing his own, younger men at the positions veterans like Wilson and Gabby Hartnett had claimed for so long.²⁷

The situation had come to a head several weeks earlier, in late August, with the latest in a series of Hornsby-Wilson run-ins, this one at the Polo Grounds in New York. In the locker room, Hornsby forced a tearful Wilson, hung over and dejected, to promise the team that he would never flout Hornsby’s rules again. The Chicago public had heard little about that scene at the time, nor that Wrigley, Veeck, and Hornsby had reached a decision on Wilson’s future.

Veeck had been cryptic about Wilson’s future. “Never discuss these things in advance,” he said.

“In advance of what?” asked a reporter.

“In advance of his signing or going elsewhere,” replied Veeck, ambiguously.

William Wrigley finally confirmed Wilson's fall, adding, "You can't be a sport at night and a ballplayer the next day."²⁸

There was still no official decision from the club, but in Cincinnati a few days later the Cubs found themselves short-handed in the outfield. While the National League's reigning home run champion remained on the bench, Hornsby wrote out a lineup with a pitcher playing the outfield in Wilson's place. Hornsby explained, "Hack knows he is through as a Cub, so it would hardly be fair either to himself or the team to play him." Besides, he observed forthrightly, Wilson's replacement, Bud Teachout, wasn't much of a pitcher anyway; what harm was there in trying him out in a new spot?²⁹

At the end of the series the Cubs gathered at Cincinnati's union depot for the return trip to Chicago. A six-game losing streak and Wilson's troubles had soured the atmosphere. The Cubs, in recent years the league's powerhouse, were only three games over .500 and fading. They lost again that afternoon, their sixth setback in succession. Wilson, who had probably been drinking on his way to the station, cornered a couple of sportswriters in one of the Pullmans and began griping about how they had covered his difficulties that summer. (Actually, the Chicago press had treated Wilson's troubles sympathetically for the most part.) While Wilson warmed up to his subject, Pat Malone, star pitcher and Wilson confrere, joined the group. Malone had also probably been drinking, probably with Wilson.

"Hello, Pat," said Harold Johnson of the *Chicago American*. "I've just been talking to one of the four greatest pitchers of all time," he said with a smirk; Johnson was evidently referring to the old-time Cub great Mordecai "Three-Finger" Brown, who had just appeared in an old-timers' game that afternoon. The reporter and the two-hundred-pound player were at close quarters in the cramped train car. Malone's reply was a quick right jab to Johnson's jaw, and then another, and a third. Wayne Otto of the *Chicago Herald and Examiner* tried to push Malone away. Malone turned on him. With more operating room this time, he landed a roundhouse that bloodied Otto and loosened several front teeth. Wilson, himself a renowned brawler, stood by while several Cubs and the team's traveling secretary, Bob Lewis, pulled Malone away. When Hornsby pushed his way to the scene, Wilson turned loose a barrage of insults on the manager—"everything I could think of," he admitted later.³⁰

The train rolled into the night, Chicago-bound. Hornsby caught up with Wilson when it pulled into the station the next morning. “Report to Mr. Veeck at noon today. He wants to see you,” he told Wilson. The Cubs’ most popular player since Grover Cleveland Alexander made his way across the Loop to the Wrigley building, situated on the jog that Michigan Avenue makes as it crosses the Chicago River. Even today it is the city’s most superb vantage point—to the south the panorama of Grant Park and its Grecian museum temples; to the east, at the bend of the Chicago River, the mammoth white bulk of the Merchandise Mart; to the north, the Magnificent Mile, climaxed at its extremity by the Palmolive Building, a giant new lighthouse topped with the Lindbergh Beacon in 1931, a midcontinental guide for air travelers approaching across the expanse of Lake Michigan, shimmering to the east.³¹

The son of the western Pennsylvania mills, though, was not a sightseer as he stepped from the cab. Newspapermen mobbed him as he entered the lobby and asked the elevator attendant for the ninth floor, a moot request, because the elevator man certainly recognized Wilson on sight and knew exactly which floor he wanted. There was also no doubt in the mind of anyone present that Wilson was about to share the fate of Grover Alexander, another franchise icon who had made this same trip five years earlier.

Wilson was ushered into room 936, where Veeck and Hornsby awaited. Veeck pulled out a sheaf of reports from private and hotel detectives who had shadowed Wilson and Pat Malone each night in Cincinnati. Hornsby broke in to add that Wilson had insulted both Veeck and Mr. Wrigley himself in his profane outburst the night before. Wilson hotly denied mocking the owner or the club president. Hornsby was lying, he protested. Veeck, unmoved, told Wilson he was suspended.³²

Wilson left the room with his head down, brushing by the press. Then Veeck called in Malone, who had arrived and taken a seat in the anteroom. After a briefer conference, Malone too left wordlessly. Veeck emerged to issue a short statement: Malone had been fined \$500 for assaulting the reporters. Wilson, the onlooker, if not the innocent in the fracas, was suspended without pay “for infraction of training rules.” He would lose approximately one-sixth of his \$33,000 salary—more than \$5,000—the price of a new Lincoln or Cadillac. It was clear that Wilson had been

banished from the Cubs not just for the season, but forever. At thirty-one, the steelmaker's son could never again hope to earn as much as he had for William Wrigley, even if he recovered his batting touch with another franchise.

Wilson brought his wife to the ballpark the next afternoon to watch the Cubs begin a series with the Cardinals. He seemed relaxed, even jaunty, onlookers thought. The crush of well-wishers, male and female, young and old, grew so great that ushers had to escort the Wilsons away. After the game, demanding autographs, the fans held Wilson hostage for another quarter hour. Then, buoyed by the affections of his public, he made his way to the Cub clubhouse to clean out his locker.³³

Hornsby was absent, and Wilson's friends were free to gather round, console him, offer their best wishes. Hornsby learned soon enough, and even though Wilson's locker was bare, and Wilson was packing for the trip back to the Potomac valley, he officially banned Wilson from entering the clubhouse again. But nothing Hornsby did, inside the clubhouse or out, could erase the memories of the grinning little fellow who had stirred Chicago's Prohibition drink for so long.

Later that week the Cubs traveled crosstown to Comiskey Park to play the White Sox in a benefit game for the city's unemployed, an idea broached first on the *Chicago Tribune's* sports page by Arch Ward (also soon to propose and promote baseball's first midsummer All-Star game). By some estimates, up to half the men in Chicago were out of work. The parks were filled with them during the day, and at night the lower deck of the acclaimed Michigan Avenue Bridge, hard by Mr. Wrigley's splendid terra-cotta skyscraper, was theirs. In "Bronzeville," the ghetto not far from Comiskey Park, families evicted for back rent were holing up by the thousands in condemned buildings; in the vacant lots of the near West Side, plainly visible from the skyscrapers of the Loop, the homeless were constructing their "Hooverilles" of plywood, cardboard, anything that warded off the wind and the rain.³⁴

Newly elected mayor Anton Cermak, other high-ranking politicians of both parties, and more than forty thousand fans turned out for the Cubs-Sox benefit contest. Commissioner Landis, with his little granddaughter, made his way to his box seat and settled his chin on the railing in the pose

he had made famous at so many World Series. In another box, Wilson sat with his wife, once again drawing applause and good wishes as they took their seats; on the field a shower of spoiled lemons and tomatoes greeted Hornsby as soon as he emerged from the dugout. For once, Cubs and Sox fans were speaking in unison.³⁵

With Hornsby on hand to make a list, only one of Wilson's well-wishing teammates from the day before had the brass to acknowledge the presence of Wilson a few feet away: Gabby Hartnett. The Cubs' regular catcher since 1923 may have been motivated by courage or simple bravado—or, after spending much of the summer sharing the Hornsby doghouse with Wilson, he may have wanted his own ticket out of town.

In 1931 Hartnett, who would carve out his own niche in the Hall of Fame, had nothing like the national celebrity of either Hornsby or Wilson. What happened next, though, lives on in pop culture, beyond the technicalities of Hornsby's .424 batting average in 1924 or Wilson's 191 RBI in 1930. Perhaps Hartnett was simply careless when he heard a call from a nearby box—it could have been “Machine Gun Jack” McGurn, or someone else in the entourage surrounding Al Capone in his box seat, even Capone himself. But there the Big Fellow sat, whiling away the days before the income-tax-evasion trial that by the end of the month would end his own career.³⁶

Hartnett might have thought that Hornsby wanted to banish him from the roster; perhaps he was even trying to bait Hornsby into action—after all, it was obvious that the intolerable Rajah had a virtual lifetime contract with William Wrigley. It could have been mere bravado: Hartnett, plain-spoken, a man's man, a natural leader, was yet a man of nearly thirty-one with a family. Whatever the overture, Hartnett approached Capone, leaned over the retaining wall among the ward-heelers and fedora-topped bodyguards, and signed a baseball for Capone's son, who sat on his father's right. A man and his boy at the ballpark on a late-summer day—what could be more American? Signing a baseball was something the gregarious catcher would do for any lad who asked, whether that lad had goons with him or not. If Hartnett really did want Hornsby to fire him, there were plenty of photographers on hand to capture the moment.³⁷

Then the game got under way. The fans seemed most interested in booing Hornsby, and the heckling redoubled when he was caught off base in

the middle innings. Showers of lemons and tomatoes dogged him wherever he went. Yet no one remembers the day for Charlie Root's shutout of the Sox, or the \$45,000 raised for the unemployed that afternoon. The message sent by the photo—that a gangster could summon a major league ballplayer for small talk on the grounds where the Black Sox had thrown the World Series to the underworld—caught the nation's eye.³⁸

According to baseball tradition, Landis summons Hartnett for a conference, where Hartnett supposedly unleashes an immortal riposte: "I go to his place of business, Judge; why shouldn't he come to mine?" True or not, the National League soon instituted a rule prohibiting player-fan interaction at the ballpark. Hartnett somehow survived the displeasure of both Landis and his manager. He would snap back from his off season, outlast Hornsby, resume his role as starting catcher, lead the Cubs to three more pennants, manage the team, stroke a famed, pennant-sealing home run ("The Homer in the Gloamin'"), and join the Hall of Fame.³⁹

Capone had no such future. Within weeks he made the news again by attending a sports event—this time a football game at Northwestern University's Dyche Stadium. The dark lord of Chicago had to abandon his seat after the first half with the crowd jeering him, and not long thereafter a jury of his Illinois peers bravely decided that he was guilty of tax evasion. By the next spring he had had entered the federal penitentiary system, the effective end to his career and power. Somehow, though, Capone entered baseball history identified with the Cubs. Eventually old-timers would specify Wrigley Field as the place where Hartnett and Capone met. Some said that Scarface was a regular patron at Cubs Park, and that fans crowded around him for his autograph, just as they would for Wilson's or Hartnett's. By the end of the century, an establishment in Uptown, deep in the old O'Banion-Weiss-Moran territory on the North Side, staked out a claim as Al Capone's favorite speakeasy.

Capone's sudden fall did not mean that the boobirds had forgotten about a more important bad guy, Rogers Hornsby. The Cub manager escaped from Comiskey Park after the Thursday afternoon charity exhibition and headed back to the North Side for the last weeks of the 1931 season. Suddenly, Rogers Hornsby's own future was on the line, his inaugural season as Cub manager not proceeding according to plan. A nine-game losing streak had left the team only three games above .500—territory that no

Cub team had entered so late in years, certainly none since McCarthy's arrival in 1926. Fortunately, a couple of second-division contingents were coming to town—first the Phillies, then the Braves, for a five-game series, capped by a doubleheader on Sunday the 13th.

Hartnett and Capone entered history on Thursday, September 9. By Sunday the 13th, as Bruce Cunningham and Rogers Hornsby faced off, Hack Wilson was somewhere on the way to Martinsburg, West Virginia, his off-season residence about seventy-five miles northwest of Washington DC. Unlike the previous autumn, no band blared when the Wilsons and their son, Bobby, finally pulled into Martinsburg, no committee awaited to present another new Buick.⁴⁰

Wilson pulled last year's model up to the white clapboard two-story at 512 John Street. The maples on the block were beginning to turn, and there was the early-autumn feel that comes to the Alleghenies in September. Inside the house, the Wilsons looked around as people will when they have been gone a long while. Wilson passed through the living room, where in winters past reporters had sat reverently, asking the home run king about which ballparks he liked best, his latest plans for vaudeville, or his projected boxing career. They had wanted to know how he trained, how he chose his bats, his favorite food, his pastimes.

At some point Wilson reached the basement. He could convert the area into a little gym, he decided, with a punching bag and an exercise bicycle and some other fitness equipment. His comeback would have to begin here.⁴¹

He had faced worse before. His unmarried mother had died when he was seven. By the time he finished sixth grade at age fourteen, it was time to go to work. Playing for company teams led to semipro ball, then the minor leagues, and finally John McGraw's New York Giants and a starting assignment in the 1924 World Series. However great it was to be young and a Giant, though, Wilson lost his batting eye, just as in 1931, or overdid his roistering, or both. Then Joe McCarthy picked him up. Wilson and McCarthy, joining the Cubs the same week in 1925, formed the foundation stones of Mr. Wrigley's ball club. Hack had been McCarthy's special project, a carefree, unbuttoned sort who threw bats and fists, and thought about it later. In the Wilson-McCarthy partnership, thinking was McCar-

thy's job; all Wilson had to do was show up at game time and batter the ball unmercifully. He did that often for the next five seasons, leading the league in home runs four times and in RBI twice; for the period he averaged 35 home runs, double figures better than any rival in the league. Odd-looking, hot-headed, hitting and fielding unconventionally, Wilson became the National League's "draw," its most-booped member, his neck reddening as the fans jeered the frequent Wilsonian strikeout, the long black bat slamming to the ground or skittering across the field, the answering shower of lemons from the stands, or the likewise not-infrequent error—followed, almost inevitably, by the crash of a base-clearing drive, often into the seats. He tossed bats, beat up spectators and other ballplayers, and drew a police escort.⁴²

Wilson's 1930 season stamped him as one of the extraordinary players in the game: 56 home runs, a National League record that lasted nearly seventy years, and a major league mark of 191 RBI that lasted into the next century. Toward the end of the desperate 1930 pennant race, an Atlas in a patchwork lineup, he singlehandedly shouldered his team's drive toward a league championship. Day after day, there was a new personal high, a new league record, a new major league mark.

It had not been enough. Wilson's ally and mentor, Joe McCarthy, paid the price for disappointing the ownership with a second-place finish, immediately following a World Series loss the previous year. In McCarthy's place, the Cubs chose Rogers Hornsby—driven, acid-tongued, intolerant, among the greatest of the great players, and the manager of a world champion by age thirty. To many, especially and most crucially William Wrigley, Hornsby seemed to represent everything that McCarthy was not. New York, the Gotham City that Chicago had dreamed of overtaking, quickly obtained McCarthy's services, and there he would be good for another eight major league pennants and seven world championships, seven more than Mr. Wrigley and the son who inherited his ball club would claim. Nearly fifteen years McCarthy reigned in New York; Hornsby could not last another year with the Cubs before being banished to a lifetime of losing ball clubs and a descent into the minor leagues, even some low comedy in the Mexican League. Hornsby was outside the winner's circle for good—in both baseball and his chosen hobby of horse-track wagering.

Despite Mac's departure from Chicago, Wilson could console himself with his 1931 contract, at well above thirty thousand dollars, a level that only Ruth and probably Hornsby had ever exceeded. A product endorser and even, for a short time, a vaudevillian,⁴³ he spent the off-season relaxing in Martinsburg with his family and his numerous lodge brothers. Wilson seemed to be living the American dream, his lifestyle assured and his team poised to contend indefinitely for NL supremacy.

In truth Wilson was only a few ballgames from a downfall almost unparalleled in American sport. From September 1930 to September 1931, Wilson virtually undid a lifetime's work, his long journey to overcome poverty and illiteracy, his hard-won status as one of America's best-paid men, his ascendancy as the quasi-Ruth.

McCarthy and then Wilson, the favorites of the era that had drawn the largest crowds and the most excitement in baseball, had left the scene less than twelve months apart. By the time Wilson departed, the Depression had come to stay, and the raucous beat of the 1920s that Chicago symbolized in so many ways was ebbing. Capone, that gangster of gangsters, was going down. Chicago's eager claims to national and even world leadership, not just in baseball but in industry and commerce, architecture, public works, even corruption and notoriety, slowly faded. The Century of Progress lakefront exhibition of 1933–34 never dominated the popular imagination like the Columbian Exposition of 1893; New York's exposition of 1939 instead became the gateway to the future. Chicago had been the birthplace of the skyscraper, but new construction on its skyline, having thrust above the long lakefront in decade after decade of innovation, would stagnate into the 1950s. By that time the term "Second City" had become popular—coined by a New Yorker who concluded with much truth, "Chicago's bid for grandeur has failed."⁴⁴

Neither would Mr. Wrigley's ball club ever fulfill its owner's extravagant vision. Time and again they would fall short of the prize—twice, in humiliating fashion, to New York—a number 2 team in the number 2 city. But that lay far in the future. Perhaps the booing and jeering Cub fans of September 1931 dimly realized that the exits of McCarthy and then Wilson meant the end of the sweet Wrigley Field madness of the late 1920s, when the fans stormed the gates and even the field in midgame, when Wilson invaded enemy dugouts and friendly stands to prove his manhood, when

fans toured the neighborhood speakeasies of the toddling town with their favorite, Wilson, heckled and booed and cheered wherever he went.

But the story did not quite end with Wilson's downfall, and Mr. Wrigley's dream had always embraced more than the exploits of one hard-drinking, if superb, slugger. It had begun in another day, really another age, before Chicagoans had ever heard of Joe McCarthy and Hack Wilson.