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OPENING DAY AT WEEGHMAN PARK

APRIL 23, 1914

PULL UP TO THE BUMPER

Suppose you're going to see the Chicago Federal League club play its first home game at the team's brand-new stadium on Clark and Addison Streets. Perhaps you're a member of the Union League Club, the Rienzi Restaurant Federal League Booster's Club, or the Bravo el Toro Club: North Side good-fellow societies of well-to-do businessmen and civic boosters who bought their tickets in blocks reserved for them by the Feds.

You might be a West Side businessman and friend of former Cubs business manager Charley Williams, who had recently been stolen away by Weeghman. As a member of the Charley Williams Booster Club, you've already purchased your seats either at the West Town State Bank at Madison Street and Western Avenue or the Garfield Park Bank, way out west at Madison and Crawford Avenue, as long as you showed your membership card.

Or maybe you're a North Side resident, a German, Swede, or Lithuanian living in or near Lake View, who has been waiting with anticipation for this day. You trekked downtown to Jack Shannon's sporting goods store at 54 East Monroe Street in order to buy reserved tickets. Then you made plans to skip work to watch the game, and maybe stop at the Bismarck Garden at Halsted and Grace for a beer.

You could be one of the utterly twentieth-century young women responding to Feds owner Charley Weeghman's push to

bring respectability and comfort to baseball fans in his new palace. Women, recently granted the vote in Chicago, were feeling their power—one expression of which was to go out to the ball yard, make their presence known, and hoot and holler just like the men.

Whatever your background, it's almost certain that you had a first-class time at the new Federal League ballpark. Whether you took the el train to Weeghman Park for just a nickel or whether you walked, your admission was well spent. Even if you were a swell pulling up to the park in your black Ford Model T, Pierce-Arrow, or Studebaker, Charley Weeghman promised value for your money. Photos of the time show automobiles parked on the North Side of Addison Street as well as right next to the ballpark—where today an outdoor café and the Ron Santo statue are located.

With its clear sight lines, modern and clean facilities, and vibrant neighborhood feel, Weeghman Park made great impressions on everyone who attended. The verdict was unanimous: this was a keen new plant.

DOG AND PONY SHOW

The Chifeds' pregame ceremonies honoring the opening of the park were characteristically over-the-top in substance and style, beginning with a huge parade starting downtown and heading north. All sorts of hoopla marked important baseball games during these years, led by a dizzying patriotic whirl of elaborate flag ceremonies, marching bands, and players trooping the field with bats held over their shoulders like rifles. Nonmilitary flash and filigree were in evidence as well. Hometown players and managers received large flower horseshoes, massive trophies, and gold-plated loving cups. Some well-loved opponents were also feted.

Given the central role of Charley Weeghman, one of Chicago's bon vivants, in the opening of this new palace, celebrations greeting the park's debut could have been expected to veer dangerously toward overkill. While any owner might have thought

to hire a brass band, Good-Time Charley couldn't settle for that; for April 23, 1914, he invited *ten* brass bands. As the *Inter-Ocean* remarked that morning, "Each band ought to be able to render one piece during the afternoon—that is, unless several plan to play at the same time."

South of downtown at Sixteenth Street and Michigan Avenue, dozens of cars met up to travel en masse to the new North Side ballpark. Headed by yet another brass band, the caravan drove north on Michigan to Jackson Boulevard, west to LaSalle Street, north to Madison, east to Michigan, and north to the lakefront. The convoy then jaunted north by the lake up toward Addison, then west to the park. This curious route was most likely taken to avoid the traffic jams found every weekday in downtown Chicago, then and now.

The Bravo el Toro Club's rooters—businessmen and social leaders from the emerging North Side—didn't ride from downtown in the parade, begging off to ready themselves for their activities. For many of them, preparation consisted of a few beverages at the Bismarck Gardens—known at the time as Chicago's Pride. The popular local restaurant, bar, and music hall was located at Evanston Avenue (now Broadway), Halsted, and Grace. The usual musical programs included opera, light opera, lieder (German art songs for piano and voice), military songs, and hymns, while the kitchen offered an extensive menu and huge wine and beer lists. When big-league baseball came to the neighborhood, the crowds of hale-fellows-well-met fit naturally. The bar—one of the many large beer gardens open in the city at the time—had already taken the intelligent step of advertising to its built-in audience, erecting a sign atop one of the apartments overlooking the park's right-field wall.

Once well oiled, the boosters departed the tavern and walked to the park. Eventually three thousand of them arrived from various locales during batting practice, all in full toreador regalia with gold and red sashes. The rooters then staggered to their reserved section. Meanwhile, a hundred of the organization's fin-

est, decked out in sombreros and long linen coats, made their way onto the field. Drummers and a full German band accompanied the comic parade.

As if that wasn't enough, the high-spirited group had a live bull in tow. A proposed bullfight, much publicized in the days before the game, did not come off; the well-fed and sleepy bull was less than enthusiastic. But the resulting shenanigans were enough to interrupt batting practice, according to George Rice in the April 24 *Daily Journal*, and amused the fans to no end. How in the world did these bozos even get on the field? Easy. Charley Weeghman was a member of the Bravo el Toro Club.

THE WAR SPIRIT RAN HIGH

After several rooters' groups marched onto the newly laid field, the real ceremonies began. Twenty members of the Daughters of the Grand Army of the Republic Relief Corps, dressed in white and led by relief corps president Ida Wright, toted a thirty-foot silk American flag around the ballpark. During the procession, one or more of the brass bands struck up "The Star-Spangled Banner," which was not yet the national anthem. Weeghman and Walker accompanied the ladies on their jaunt, as did players from both teams, assorted dignitaries, and fans simply swept up by the emotion of the moment. Hundreds of people crowded onto the field as fifteen ladies ran the flag up the pole in deep center field.

Fans greeted the patriotic ceremony with great gusto. Soldiers fired off a twenty-one-gun salute, and the club set off a barrage of fireworks when the flag reached the top of the pole. The huge banner, made of an extremely thin, gauzy silk, did not last long in the Chicago winds. Local newspapers carry references to the club putting up "new" flags during the 1914 and 1915 seasons.

Following the salute, the parade of players, ladies, and musicians headed to home plate, where Joe Tinker received carts of flowers and, oddly, three dozen neckties. The usual awkward hilarity ensued as the manager "was compelled to smile amid the

blooms for the benefit of the moving picture machine,” according to Sam Weller in the next day’s *Tribune*. Rooters gave a grinning Weeghman a gold loving cup.

A procession of a hundred cars, representing friends of Tinker from his west suburban hometown of Oak Park, also drove through the ballyard before the game began. Amazingly, wrote Weller, “the outfield was a bit soft, but the diamond looked fine” despite the pregame ruckus.

In what may have been a first, Weeghman paid to have thousands of baseball caps in different colors and decorated with the Chifeds logo passed out to ticket buyers. Small felt flags were also given out. “Thousands of spectators donned the little caps distributed by the local management, while others waved Chifed pennants,” noted J. G. Davis in the April 24 *Tribune*.

This was a noted contrast to what other clubs did. For decades, the New York Yankees refused to allow replica caps with their club’s logo to be manufactured. Yankees management felt that its logo, and by extension its franchise, would be cheapened if just anyone could wear a Yankees hat.

WHO WAS THERE?

The single-decked park officially seated eighteen thousand at this time, but nearly twenty-one thousand souls packed it on April 23. The right-field bleacher wall was topped with a row of spectators, and fans stood. Hundreds of others watched the game and ceremonies from windows and rooftops of buildings on Waveland and Sheffield Avenues, past the left- and right-field fences. Still more baseball bugs hung off the elevated platform at Addison. Two large blocks of temporary “circus” seats, placed down the left- and right-field foul lines and jutting into fair territory, were jammed as well. Other fans lined up around the field and ringed the outfield in orderly lines, sitting in fair territory. (Work on the new park went right up to the last minute; ladders, sawhorses, and tools leant against the left-center field wall, some 420 feet

from home plate.) Some two thousand others were turned away because there was no room. Three of those were Elsie Dabel, her mom, and her sister. Elsie did notice plenty of handsome men hanging around the ballpark that day, though, as noted in her diary:

Today was the opening of the Federal League Ball Park. . . . We didn't go in. I never saw such crowds in all my life. . . . There were *so* many nifts there. Before the game they shot some kind of thing into the air and a little parachute came out. They had two bands there which kept playing "This is the Life," a very appropriate song for the occasion. The Chifeds won. There was an awful cute pennant guy there who kept fancying us. We bought a pennant for a quarter. We certainly had a fine time but I was wishing I could have gone in.

The exclusion of the Dabel ladies from the ballpark notwithstanding, there were, J. G. Davis wrote the next day in the *Tribune*, a "large number of women present."

Local celebrities attended the opening in abundance, too, including chief contractor William Sinek, league president James Gilmore and his wife, Louis and Mrs. Comiskey, and several local judges. Umpire-in-chief Bill Brennan introduced the players from both sides to the fans, one hopes with the aid of a megaphone.

THE GAME

The weather was cold and damp, and a harsh wind roared in from the lake. After John Sexton, corporation counsel of Chicago, threw out the first ball (Mayor Carter Harrison was out of town), the Feds took the field.

The home team got off to a hot start against Kansas City pitcher Chief Johnson, who was removed before the bottom of the second inning, not by his manager but on orders from the authorities. Johnson, who had left the Cincinnati Reds to join the Federal League, was served with papers by the NL club and

forbidden to pitch. By then, the Chifeds had already tagged Johnson for three runs, and they went on to add another in the third, two in the fourth, two more in the sixth, and another in the eighth. Claude Hendrix threw a five-hitter at the visitors, and Chicago won the game 9–1.

THE NORTH SIDE HAS SOMETHING

F. A. McNerny's words in the April 24 edition of the *Post* showed that the Feds had convinced at least some of the newspapermen:

Charley Weeghman made a lot of friends yesterday.

About 22,000 fans went to the Buns' North Side ball park, and they went away tickled to death with the treatment they had received . . . each was made to feel that he was welcome. Nothing in the park was too good for him. The fun was clean and amusing and the general effect was that of a huge family having a good time.

This tone reflected Charley Weeghman's good fellowship, and it is significant because it indicates that those who went to the opening game will go again and again, and they will bring others with them.

In other words, the North Side has good reason today to stand up and holler. It has something.

Even the *Tribune*, a paper not unconditionally in love with Charley or his Buns, weighed in on April 24 with unreserved optimism. J. G. Davis wrote: "Over 21,000 fans performed their part in making the opening one of the greatest in the history of the game. . . . A glance at the wonderful setting for yesterday's combat brought the thought that someone must have rubbed Aladdin's lamp to effect such a magical transformation." What the opening of Weeghman Park meant to the North Side of Chicago is nearly incalculable. The park's success on this day was the exclamation point to the region's new vitality. The pseudonymic Le Count, in