

# Lawrence S. Ritter's Interviews with Baseball Pioneers of the Early 20th Century (1962-1966)

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*Album cover*

## *Larry Ritter and “The Glory of Their Times”*

The oral history interviews that Lawrence S. Ritter recorded with early-20th century baseball players are among the great treasures of baseball history. Twenty-six of Ritter’s interviews make up “The Glory of Their Times: The Story of The Early Days of Baseball Told By the Men Who Played It” (1966). Wrote Thomas Lask in the “New York Times” following the book’s release: “In ‘The Glory of Their Times,’ Lawrence Ritter has fashioned an authentic piece of Americana, and if there is a youngster over 50 who does not respond to it, he must have a heart of stone.”

Imbued with a firm knowledge of the game’s history, Ritter steered his interview subjects with a light hand, generally avoiding questions about specific events. “Asking no more than he had to,” wrote David Margolick in the “New York Times” in 2002, “Mr. Ritter listened, even when nothing was being said.” Ritter also refrained from interrupting when players went on tangents or made periodic errors of recollection. “When his subjects embellished or dissembled, he let them be,” said Margolick. Whatever historical imprecision exists in Ritter’s interviews, the players’ voices endure.

The result is a tale of baseball—and American life—from a time when the sport was finding its way. Though the careers of players included in the recordings spanned between 1898 and 1947, most of the book focuses on baseball’s Deadball Era (1901-1919). Many of the challenges of contemporary living are woven into the stories. Baseball itself also was rough and unstable, not to mention a minimally-respected profession, and players’ recollections often hew to their fear and uncertainty as they contended with poor salaries and uncertain futures.

At the same time, the players repeatedly express their sense of fulfillment about being involved with the sport itself, and the sense of camaraderie among players is never far from the surface. Such cohesiveness was born of teams traveling together by train as well as a culture of forming

firm bonds among teammates. “Here is what it felt like to be young and a big-leaguer in a high-spirited country a long time ago,” wrote Ritter in the original preface to “The Glory of Their Times,” “The narratives contained in this book are chronicles of men who chased a dream, and, at least for a time, caught up with it and lived it.”

In recording his interviews, Ritter, a professor of economics and finance at New York University, said that he traveled more than 75,000 miles across the country. He sometimes had to rely on good fortune. While trying to track down Sam Crawford in California, the interviewer fortuitously located the former Detroit Tigers outfielder in a California laundromat. When asked by Ritter if he knew of Crawford’s whereabouts, the former player offered a now-famous reply: “Well, I should certainly hope so, bein’ as I’m him.”

Of course, there are distinctive baseball stories. Former Tigers outfielder Davy Jones tells how teammate Germany Schaefer stole first base (so to speak), and Jimmy Austin, formerly of the St. Louis Browns, talks of serendipitously becoming a part of the famous photograph taken by Charles Conlon in 1910 of Ty Cobb ferociously sliding into third base.

Still, the story also includes how Al Bridwell went from making \$3 a day working in a shoe factory at age 13 to earning \$150 a month playing baseball. It is also about how John “Chief” Meyers (“Chief” being a nickname he despised), a Native American, made it in baseball while feeling he “didn’t belong” in the game because of discrimination. Hans Lobert describes how his Cincinnati Reds team lacked medical professionals and that a call would go out for a doctor in the stands if a player got hurt. In a country without a social safety net, Ritter’s audio recordings reflect how baseball was, in many ways, every player for himself in an oftentimes unforgiving era.

Though Ritter nominally was trying to record the stories of a bygone period, he later described his pursuit as “a quest of a more personal nature,” one which reconnected Ritter emotionally with his boyhood as well as with his own late father. Ritter also strengthened bonds with his son, Steve, who assisted with the project.

Considering that newspaper reporting on baseball during the Deadball Era was praiseworthy and uncritical, Ritter’s recordings add to the historical record. Listeners learn that Jones struggled mightily to get along with Cobb, his longtime teammate, and that Cleveland’s Bill Wambsganss found the burdens of fame to be difficult following his unassisted triple play in the 1920 World Series.

The players are remarkably open and reflective. Their respective trains of thought go hither and yon, which makes for compelling listening. The players also exhibit accents and drawls, employ creative grammar, include unprovoked musings, and otherwise display all of the markings of unvarnished real-life conversation. As William Leonard said in the “Chicago Tribune” in 1966, the book is “history from the perspective of the participant, and sounding as if it were his own words, instead of a rewrite man’s.”

The players, in general, avoid self-aggrandizement and, perhaps surprisingly, often do not trumpet their own era as being better than contemporary baseball in the 1960s. Christy Mathewson and

Walter Johnson receive great praise but so also do Willie Mays and Sandy Koufax, two baseball giants several decades removed from the Deadball Era.

The audio recordings have been available for purchase since the 1970's, first as a vinyl record and, more recently, in CD and MP3 formats. Whether it concerns the Fred Merkle game in 1908 or Fred Snodgrass' infamous muff in the 1912 World Series, Ritter's recordings and book help to fill in what really happened. Yet the feel of the recordings, in many ways, trumps the lightly-edited transcriptions in the book, as outstanding as "The Glory of Their Times" is. "Its stories are even more winning when heard aloud, spun by weathered voices with archaic accents ("Cincinnati," "Eye-o-way"), with cars backfiring, chairs creaking, matches igniting, wives scoffing, and pop bottles popping in the background," said Margolick.

For whatever factual imperfections the recordings may have, many, including esteemed baseball writer Roger Angell, have called Lawrence Ritter's book "almost perfect." No one else has come close to capturing baseball's tenor on tape as Ritter has done. Not only was "The Glory of Their Times" a bestseller, but, Tim Wiles, former Director of Research at the Baseball Hall of Fame Library, has also said that the book based on Ritter's recordings was so consequential that it "legitimized baseball as a subject for cultural inquiry."

A foundational part of early baseball history, Ritter's interviews have become the standard by which all other baseball oral histories are considered. They are magnificent.

*John N. McMurray chairs both the Oral History Committee and the Deadball Era Committee of the Society for American Baseball Research (SABR). He is a past chair of SABR's Larry Ritter Award subcommittee which annually recognizes the best book focused primarily on baseball's Deadball Era.*

\*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.