



Fielder



with

Dreams

THOUGH HIS CAREER WOULD ONE DAY TAKE A BAD HOP,
A CENTURY AGO SHOELESS JOE JACKSON WAS
PLAYING BASEBALL IN NEW ORLEANS

BY S. DERBY GISCLAIR

WITH ALL DUE RESPECT TO W.P. KINSELLA, whose 1980 short story *Shoeless Joe Comes to Iowa* became the basis for the 1989 box office hit *Field of Dreams*, Shoeless Joe never played baseball in Iowa. Both the short story and the movie were enjoyable works of fiction whose most memorable line, "If you build it, he will come," introduced many modern-day Americans to the story of a ragtime-era baseball player named Shoeless Joe Jackson, who gained national prominence by battling Ty Cobb year after year as one of the game's most prolific hitters, but whose career came to a tragic and abrupt end in a cloud of controversy and scandal.

In reality, Shoeless Joe Jackson did come to New Orleans in 1910 to play baseball for the city's minor league club, the Pelicans. He arrived on March 10th, just in time to play 14 games during the spring training season, mostly against the Cleveland Indians, who had come from their camp in Alexandria, La., to play a series of exhibition games against the Chicago Cubs and the New Orleans Pelicans.

In his third year of professional baseball, Jackson was sent to New Orleans by Philadelphia A's manager Connie Mack. Born in rural South Carolina, the illiterate Jackson was uncomfortable in Philadelphia and uneasy playing in front of the rowdy and generally unfriendly crowds in the northeast. One day in September 1909, Jackson hopped off the streetcar taking him to the A's ballpark as it passed in front of a burlesque theater. He spent the afternoon enjoying the show, but missed the ballgame. When Mack confronted his young player, Jackson just shrugged his shoulders.

The usually even-tempered Mack had had enough of Jackson. Mack had put up with the antics of star pitcher Rube Wadell, who would often abruptly run off the field chasing after fire engines, but he was apparently in no mood to put up with the 20-year-old Joe Jackson. After only 10 games Mack was ready to trade his young prodigy, but he still wanted to see him succeed.

Mack's American Leaguers (consisting mainly of members of his Philadelphia A's) had just played an exhibition game on Dec. 19, 1909 in New Orleans as the last stop on a financially disappointing cross-country barnstorming tour. He thought Jackson would feel at home in a southern

city like New Orleans, where the Pelicans played in the Class-A Southern Association. There Jackson could hone his considerable baseball skills without putting his contract with Philadelphia in jeopardy.

Mack pondered the question all winter and waited until mid-February before he contacted Charles Frank, manager of the New Orleans Pelicans, about working with his young player.

Frank had been scouring teams across the country to find an outfielder who could add some needed spark to his batting order. Just eight days after he sold veteran outfielder Frank Huelsman to Mobile in November 1909, he signed Willis "Butch" Rementer from the Lancaster Red Roses in the Class-B Tri-State League. He would later sign Sam Brooks in February, but neither player made it to New Orleans for spring training. When Connie Mack offered Frank the chance to safeguard Joe Jackson, the Pelican manager jumped at the opportunity.

Jackson batted .305 during spring training and the local press took notice. He had batted a respectable .346 with the Greenville Spinners in the Class-D Carolina League in 1908 and improved to .358 with the Savannah Indians in the Class-C South Atlantic League in 1909. He had seen playing time in a total of 10 games in the major leagues without much success. New Orleans was a turning point for Jackson to prove to the owners and the fans that he belonged in the major leagues and, as the sole support of his wife and extended family back in South Carolina, he could be relied on to take his baseball career seriously.

Following a tune-up game against a local semi-pro team, the Parker-Blakes, the 1910 Southern Association season was off to a grand start. Opening Day was Wednesday, April 13th and was marked by - what else - a parade consisting of 40 horse-drawn carriages whose route that day was from City Hall up St. Charles Avenue to Julia Street, Julia to Camp Street to "newspaper row" (where a stop was made in front of each newspaper from Camp Street to Canal Street), then up Canal Street to Carrollton Avenue to Pelican Park.

Built in 1908, Pelican Park was located on South Carrollton Avenue bounded by Banks Street, South Pierce Street and Palmyra Street, just across the street from present-day Jesuit High School. It →



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featured a state-of-the-art electric scoreboard that lit up whenever the Pelicans scored a run.

A crowd of several thousand watched as Jackson went 0-for-4 and the Pelicans fell to the Mobile Sea Gulls by a score of 7 - 6.

Jackson and the Pelicans played 18 games in April, posting a 12 wins and six losses (.667) record, good enough to be in first place early. Jackson batted .410 in April with 28 hits

the city’s pace was slower than Philadelphia and the fans were more appreciative. His former manager from Savannah, Bobby Gilks, was a frequent guest at the fishing camp of Pelican manager Charles Frank and former teammates Hyder “Scotty” Barr from Greenville and Frank Manush from Savannah were now playing with the Pelicans. Jackson also struck up a friendship with Joe Phillips, the Mobile catcher who owned a Vaudeville house in his West Virginia hometown and who frequented the Vaudeville shows all over New Orleans with Jackson.

After coasting through 20 games in June the Pelicans found themselves 41 wins, 30 losses and one tie (.577) and in first place. Jackson batted .320 in June and was .358 for the season, good enough to put him among the top hitters in the Southern Association. While he enjoyed the nightlife in New Orleans, he was determined not to return to the textile mills and set his mind to baseball.

Jackson and Black Betsy went on a tear during July, exploding for 31 singles, four doubles and five triples hits in 30 games, a .417 batting average for the month and raising his season average to .374. He got his 100th hit of the season on July 9th in Memphis and received a telegram from A.J. Heinemann, the Pelicans’ vice president, promising “a

ripe melon on ice” awaiting him upon his return to New Orleans. He was now the talk of the circuit and scouts from several major league clubs contacted the Pelicans to bargain for Jackson’s services. But Jackson was technically still the property of the Philadelphia A’s.

On July 23, in one of the strangest transactions in baseball history, Connie Mack traded infielder Morrie Rath to Cleveland for an outfielder named Bristol Lord plus an undisclosed sum of cash (rumored to be as much as \$7,000). Eight days later, Cleveland sent that cash to New Orleans in exchange for the rights to Joe Jackson. By structuring the transaction this way, Connie Mack kept Jackson out of the minor league draft, and thus making his transfer to Cleveland possible. Mack was not going to trade a player of Jackson’s



including two doubles and three triples. By this point, New Orleans fans were growing accustomed to the quirky centerfielder from South Carolina – the “Carolina Confection” – and his family of bats: Black Betsy, Carolyn, and Big Jim. “Give ‘em Black Betsy, Joe,” was a familiar cheer from the grandstands.

The month of May saw the Pelicans play 23 games at home and only eight on the road. They dropped into third place in the league after their first series against the Montgomery Senators, but took six of the next seven games to climb into second place. By the end of May the Pelicans had improved to 29 wins and three losses (.544) and were still in third place behind the Chattanooga Lookouts and Montgomery.

Jackson batted .340 during May with 36 hits in 31 games, five doubles and four triples among them. But he also continued to enjoy his time off the field, becoming a frequent patron of the various Vaudeville theaters that peppered downtown New Orleans.

As Mack had anticipated, Jackson did feel more comfortable in New Orleans. While being quite cosmopolitan,

1910 was truly a magical season with the New Orleans Pelicans capturing their second Southern Association pennant under manager Charles Frank. Jackson is seated third from the right.



promise to a team that was in Philadelphia's division.

When the transaction was made public, sports writers and baseball fans alike scratched their heads. Fans in New Orleans were relieved to learn that Jackson was not to report to Cleveland until the Southern Association season ended on Sept. 17. But in trading Jackson to the Indians, Mack was, in essence, paying back a favor to Cleveland owner Charles Somers.

Somers had made his fortune in steel and shipping and had bankrolled Ban Johnson's fledgling American League in 1903. Generous to a fault, Somers also loaned money over the years to other American League owners, including Charles Comiskey and Connie Mack. Somers, who also owned the New Orleans Pelicans and several other minor league teams, had also seen Jackson during spring training in New Orleans when the Pelicans played the Indians. Jackson's former Savannah manager, Bobby Gilks, was now a scout for Cleveland. Halley's Comet had become visible in April and now the planets were all in perfect alignment for this trade to occur.

Although not resting on his laurels, Jackson clearly slowed down during August, batting .318 with 28 hits in 26 games. The Pelicans and Jackson were clearly the class of the Southern Association and were entrenched in first place by the end of August with a record of 80 wins, 47 losses and two ties (.630), leaving the Birmingham Barons and the Atlanta Crackers to battle for second place. New Orleans clinched the pennant on Sept. 10 by grabbing the second game of a doubleheader against the Chattanooga Lookouts.

Jackson and his teammates returned to the Crescent City to a hero's welcome, with thousands of fans on hand to watch them play the Atlanta Crackers on September 11th - Fan Appreciation Day. Pelican Vice-President Heinemann had solicited funds from the city's businesses and fans, collecting over \$450 that was used to purchase gold watch fobs sporting a baseball and crossed bats above the Louisiana state seal - a pelican with a diamond chip in its eye.

Jackson went 0-for-3 and ended his career with the Pelicans atop the Southern Association's leader-board with a .354 batting average and 165 hits.

Jackson and his wife, Katie, and scout Bobby Gilks left New Orleans for Cleveland on Mon., Sept. 12 and didn't arrive in Cleveland until the 15th, having missed their train connection in Cincinnati.

1910 was truly a magical season with the New Orleans Pelicans capturing their second Southern Association pennant under manager Charles Frank. Their first pennant had been magical as well, coming in 1905 when New Orleans had been quarantined during the city's last yellow fever

epidemic, requiring the team to play the last half of the season on the road. The 1910 Pelicans led the league in batting (Jackson .354), hits (Jackson 165), and wins (Otto Hess 25).

Jackson would return to New Orleans in late February of 1911 to sharpen his swing with his former Pelican teammates by day and enjoy the city's Vaudeville fare by night before reporting to Cleveland's spring training camp in Alexandria on March 6th. He would return in February of 1912 before reporting to camp in Mobile on March 5. His final appearance in New Orleans came in an exhibition game in October of 1912 when he shocked the partisan crowd by striking out twice in a single game - something he had never done during any game in his career.

Jackson spent a little more than five seasons with the Cleveland Indians before being traded on Aug. 21, 1915, to the Chicago White Sox for pitcher Ed Klepfer, utility player Braggo Roth, and \$31,500 in cash. Baseball pioneer Charles Comiskey was building the White Sox into a powerhouse that eventually finished in second place in 1916 and would win the 1917 American League pennant and World Series, beating the New York Giants four games to two. After a disappointing sixth-place finish in 1918, Jackson and the White Sox captured the 1919 American League pennant by three and one-half games over Cleveland and looked like a sure thing to win the 1919 World Series over the Cincinnati Reds.

The White Sox lost the Series five games to three to the Reds, setting the stage for baseball's first major scandal - an allegation the White Sox had thrown the Series, a fix orchestrated by a combination of gambling interests and disaffected players led by first baseman Arnold "Chick" Gandel. The controversy would weigh on the team throughout the 1920 season.

Eight players, including Joe Jackson, were named as co-conspirators and later indicted in September of 1920 by a Chicago grand jury. Although acquitted in the jury trial, all eight players were summarily banned from the game of baseball for life by the newly appointed

Commissioner of Baseball, former Federal judge Kennesaw Mountain Landis.

While the extent of Jackson's involvement in the scheme is debatable and still controversial - he had a Series-best .375 batting average and handled 30 chances in the outfield without a fielding error - his banishment from baseball has gained almost mythical proportions. In the end, Shoeless Joe Jackson was a victim of baseball's desperate need to purge itself of the influence of gambling that had tarnished its image as America's pastime. His career batting average of .3558 is the third highest in the history of major league baseball, but Joe Jackson will never be enshrined in baseball's Hall of Fame. ❁

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Jackson's career batting average of .3558 is the third highest in the history of major league baseball, but is marred by his involvement with the 1919 World Series gambling scandal.