

SABR's Sherlock Holmes

Bill Haber and the search for "Walsh, J.G."

Cappy Gagnon

In the most recent issue of *The National Pastime*, Dick Thompson wrote an outstanding biography of Tom Shea, whom he described as one of baseball's four greatest biographical researchers. All of us fortunate enough to have met with Tom over the years would readily agree. Dick mentioned Bill Haber as another member of this research quartet.

I met Haber after writing him a fan letter, more than twenty years ago, for his *Baseball Research Journal* article "A Favorite Paige of Mine." Beginning biographical researchers would do well to read that story.

Sadly, Bill is no longer with us, but in one of his letters to me, he left the contents of another research article. I am offering his April 24, 1989, letter to me as the basis for this biographical sketch on both John Gabriel Walsh and Haber himself.

By way of background, I had been searching for information about "Walsh, J. G.," a one-gamer with the 1903 Philadelphia Phillies. An obscure clue I found in the musty files of the Notre Dame Sports Information Department suggested that a "Walsh" from early Notre Dame baseball had played in the major leagues. Unfortunately, all the other clues were in error. The time period was too early for Ed Walsh, Jr., son of the White Sox Hall of Famer, who pitched for Notre Dame in the '20s before joining his dad's former team.

I began by checking for players named Walsh in the Notre Dame lettermen lists, while also checking for players named Walsh in the *Baseball Encyclopedia*. Nothing matched. I asked Notre Dame Archives to see if any Walsh from the *Encyclopedia* had ever enrolled at ND. Back came a "hit", on "Walsh, J. G.," a major leaguer with scant biographical information, and no death date.

I then checked microfilm of the South Bend *Tribune* and the Notre Dame *Scholastic* (the student newspaper) to see if I could find Walsh, J. G. in a box score. Sure enough, there he was as Notre Dame's second baseman in 1901. He was not only a starting player, he was one of the top hitters on the team, with an average around .400 (box score records are incomplete). On May 3, 1901, Walsh scored five runs in a rout of Purdue. This remains the Notre Dame record for runs scored in a single game, having been duplicated only once in the university's 107 years.

Despite his fine playing record, Walsh did not earn a Notre Dame monogram. This happened several times in the first two decades of Notre Dame baseball, usually because the player signed a pro contract before completing an academic year, or because there were allegations about—or proof of—professionalism.

Having found out a little bit about Walsh, J. G., I wrote to Haber and asked if he had any new leads. Prodded by my letter, Haber went to work, and wrote me a year or two later that he had found our man. I was disappointed with his reply, because the person Haber located, even though he fit several necessary

Cappy Gagnon owes a great debt to many SABR researchers named Bob: Davids, Hoie, McConnell, Lindsey, Richardson, Tholkes, and Bailey—as well as many others with a variety of first names.

categories, would have been way too young to have played at Notre Dame in 1901. In any case, the misidentified Walsh entered at least one of the baseball encyclopedias.

Haber was nothing if not thorough and precise. Stung by my refusal to accept his newly found Walsh, he got back on the case. The final part of the Walsh saga is in Haber's own words, along with a letter from Jack Walsh, son of J. G. It gives you a taste of Haber the man as well as Haber the researcher.

Tom Shea, S. C. Thompson, Lee Allen, and Bill Haber are all gone now, probably tracking down baseball biographical leads with Ernie Lanigan and John Tattersall, but fortunately there are some outstanding biographical researchers still carrying on this painstaking research. Someday a SABR researcher will be adequately recognizing Dick Thompson, Bill Carle, Bob Hoie, and some of the rest of SABR's research stars.

April 24, 1989

Dear Cappy,

As you must have surmised by now, I found John Gabriel Walsh in early-March....

The bottom line here is that John Gabriel Walsh was born in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, March 25, 1879 (which you knew). What you didn't know is that he died in Jamaica, New York, April 25, 1947 (42 years ago tomorrow as I write this letter).

The key to finding our man was locating the deed to the Walsh property at 248 Hazle Avenue. During my inquiries, I learned that the office of the Recorder of Deeds of Luzerne County, Pennsylvania permits the public to request a trace of property records. Inasmuch as the family residence was known, I made such a request. This resulted in the location of the deed dated February 21, 1924, a copy of which I sent you on April 10th.

In addition to establishing the fact that our man was still alive as of that date and a resident of New York City, the deed revealed the fact that the Walsh family head at that time was the ballplayer's mother (listed as a widow) and that she had been preparing for her death.

Armed with this information, I wrote to the Luzerne County Register of Wills to request a search for a probated will for John G. Walsh, Jr. (who died prior to 1924) and for Mary E. Walsh (who died subsequent to February 21, 1924). My purpose here was to establish the exact date of death for either the ballplayer's father or mother. The exact date of either death would lead to a newspaper obituary and/or death notice which, in turn, would reveal the identity of a cemetery containing a Walsh family plot.

(I was ultimately hopeful of ascertaining the identity of

such a cemetery. Those records would reveal subsequent deaths in the Walsh family and would likely lead to the identity of a surviving relative. This was the approach I chose to take, the same approach which has served me well in numerous other searches I've conducted.)

Sure enough, I was able to locate a probated will for Mary E. Walsh, the ballplayer's mother. (She died January 29, 1926.) I was disappointed to find that there was no mention of a cemetery in newspaper accounts of her death. However, when I obtained a copy of the will, I found mention of St. Mary's Cemetery, Hanover Township, Luzerne County, Pennsylvania.

Upon discovering the identity of this cemetery, I immediately called there and reached a woman named Marguerite. Marguerite said she'd check for the Walsh family information I requested and I should call her back in an hour. When I called her back an hour later, she stunned me by saying that she knows THIS Walsh family, that she's a distant relative....

Marguerite suggested I call a Mr. Johnson. This man turned out to be a nephew of the ballplayer, a son of John's sister, Mary Walsh Johnson. He told me he had an uncle, John Walsh, who was a minor league umpire. I told him that this was my man, that he had gotten into one game with the Philadelphia Phillies in 1903. (He didn't know of the one major league playing appearance.) In any event, he told me that the man I should speak with is the Walsh family genealogist, a Mr. Rowan who lives in Baltimore. This man turned out to be a son of John's sister, Catherine Walsh Rowan. I then called this man in Baltimore. He seemed a bit hesitant at first to provide me with any information, perhaps, as it turned out, because I happened to reach him at an inconvenient time. I called him on a Tuesday, and he then suggested I call him back on Friday to give him some time to investigate as to the information I was requesting. I should call him on Friday at 11 AM, the Friday was February 24th.

Well, I called him back on Friday at precisely 11 AM, on the button, which is my nature. He even commented that I'm so punctual, and I told him that it drives my wife "nuts." At that point Mr. Rowan told me that John Walsh died in New York City in April of 1947. He didn't have the exact date but as a result of making a series of telephone calls to Pennsylvania, Florida and elsewhere, he had located the last surviving child of John Walsh. He gave me the man's name, and when he told me the man's address, I was stunned once again. Cappy, THE GUY LIVES RIGHT IN MY NEIGHBORHOOD, SOME TEN MINUTES FROM HERE AT THE MOST. HE HAS LIVED RIGHT HERE FOR YEARS AND IS RIGHT THERE IN THE PHONE BOOK.

Well, of course I then made a local call to John F.

Walsh of 1411 Avenue N, Brooklyn. He told me that his father's middle name was Gabriel, and kidded that his grandmother wanted her son to be an angel. (A real nice guy with a good sense of humor.) He didn't know the exact date of his father's death but told me that his father died in Queens General Hospital, Jamaica. After completing our telephone conversation (and alerting him that I'd be sending him a Baseball Questionnaire), I called the hospital for the exact date of the death. They do not maintain records more than twenty years, thus I had to send for the death certificate in order to verify the date of death.

When the DC arrived, I learned that the death occurred April 25, 1947. The son told me there was no obituary or death notice in New York or Pennsylvania but I checked out the possibility just the same. True, there was no mention of the death in New York but there was brief coverage in Pennsylvania, likely due to the fact that the body was returned to Wilkes-Barre for burial in the same family plot in which his mother was interred.

That's pretty much the story, Cap....

I wanted you to know the methods by which this death record was ascertained. Inasmuch as the name

"WALSH" is so common, I really couldn't trace family members through Wilkes-Barre City Directories with any certainty. There was a time that I began making other efforts. One such effort resulted in the discovery that a brother of the ballplayer, Charles A. Walsh, had graduated from the University of Pennsylvania School of Dentistry in 1910 and had died May 13, 1962. (It was at this point that I had learned his middle name was Aloysius and I wrote you about ascertaining the middle name of a brother of John Walsh.) This was a secondary trail to pursue and as it turned out, proved to be unnecessary. Once I learned that the office of the Recorder of Deeds could trace the property record, everything fell into place.

Enclosed please find a copy of the death certificate, the newspaper coverage of the death, the Questionnaire completed by the son and the accompanying letter written by the son. I found the letter most interesting and hope that you do also. Let me know what you think of all this.

Sincerely,

B

Here is the letter Bill enclosed.

J. Walsh

Mr. Bill Haber—This will give you a little of my father's background. He was a very wonderful man - but unfortunately he couldn't control a drinking problem. He wouldn't touch a drink for a six-month period, but when he started - he was good for a few weeks.

He never completed any of the colleges he attended. He played football at Notre Dame—until he suffered a broken shoulder, and his mother forbid him to play football. He excelled at baseball and track at the various colleges. He won so many medals, plaques and awards at track meets.

As I explained to you on the phone, my mother threw them all away. My father used to take these tokens to different "bars" to promote drinks—and it angered my mother.

He was a personal friend of John McGraw, Hughie Jennings, Bill Klem, Connie Mack, Ed Barrow and too many, many more to enumerate.

A little more his anecdotes: He was umpiring in the Texas League. A couple of days running he made some close "calls" against the home club. The fans and players got on him—so about the third day, he showed at park drunk, wearing two exposed guns.

He naturally was escorted off the playing field - When asked why he had two guns, he replied, everyone in Texas

has one gun—being an umpire, I figured I needed two. That ended his career in Texas.

He also umpired in the old Piedmont League, the Sally League, the Mid-Atlantic League—I really don't know if he ever completed a season. In later years he worked the old Negro Leagues—the Lincoln Giants, Homestead Grays, etc.

He also was a personal friend of Andy Coakley, coach of the Columbia Univ. baseball team. One of the players at that time was the great Lou Gehrig—My father was umpiring the college games—he, also was a personal friend of a Yankee scout—his name escapes me. He recommended Gehrig to this scout—telling he never seen a kid who could hit a ball so far—you know the rest.

He was umpiring in the mid-Atlantic League—One of the teams had a big raw-boned farmer pitcher, named Wilcy Moore, who had a fabulous sinker ball. In 1927, the Yankees where[sic] in a heated pennant race. My father recommended to the Yankee scout—that this said Wilcy, can shut-out any team for 2 or three innings. The rest is history—the Yankees signed him and won the pennant—Moore was sensational for a couple of late innings.

Jack W.