



Christy Mathewson's simple gravestone at Bucknell University in Lewisburg, Pa.



Reflections of a River Rat:

Memorial Day salute to Saranac Lake's finest

By Jim Holleran

Christy Mathewson's life had become a struggle by Memorial Day 1925 in Saranac Lake. He was one of the greatest pitchers in major-league baseball and later would join Walter Johnson, Babe Ruth, Ty Cobb and Honus Wagner as inaugural inductees into the Baseball Hall of Fame in 1936.

While residents of this hilly Adirondack Mountain village were decorating graves of fallen soldiers, Mathewson was bundled in the porch chair of his cure cottage at 138 Park Avenue, trying to beat tuberculosis. He was following the only known treatment of the day – recline 8 hours a day and let the cool, fresh mountain air bathe his lungs.

It was an opponent he could not set down with his pinpoint control and deceptive screwball. The chronic coughing -- at times bloody -- fever, night sweats and weight loss overcame him five months later on Oct. 7, 1925. The World Series hero and 373-game winner, now a shadow of his powerful 6-1, 195-pound frame,



Teammates called him Matty

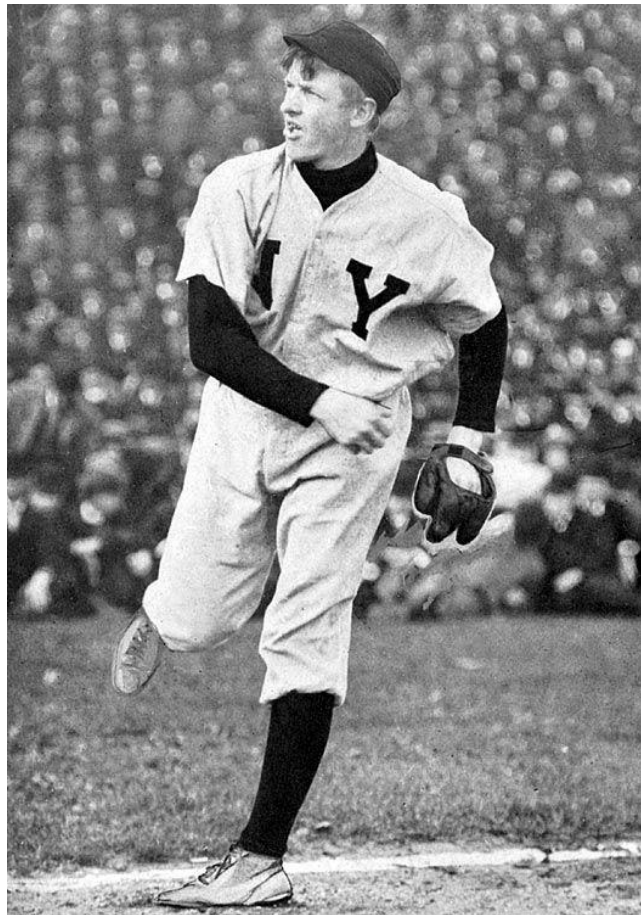
had fallen victim to the poisonous gas used in World War I, although he was far from the Western Front in France.

At his gravesite on Monday, flowers will undoubtedly be placed atop his plot adjacent to Bucknell University in Lewisburg, Pa. His body was moved from Saranac Lake to the cemetery near his greatest collegiate achievements. Bucknell is where he excelled at basketball and football, and earned All-American status as a fullback and dropkicker. But at the turn of the century, baseball ruled the day and Mathewson had been recognized as a prodigy since pitching for mill teams at age 14 in his hometown of Factoryville, Pa. His talent launched him to two no-hitters, a career 2.13 earned-run average, two World Series titles and a posthumous berth in Cooperstown.

In Mathewson's day, there were no comparisons with Koufax, Spahn, Carlton or Gibson. The only pitchers who mattered were Walter Johnson, the right-handed fastballer of the Washington Senators, and all-time wins leader (511) Cy Young, who did not make the first class at Cooperstown but entered the next year.

In the early 1900s, Mathewson's talent set him a tier above the boozers and womanizers who populated baseball, and his erudite nature made him a demi-god. He wrote newspaper columns ahead of big games. He authored plays and children's books. He wrote his memoir. At Bucknell, he was president of his class and sang in the glee club.

Later, he was dubbed "The Christian Gentleman" because of his enduring kindness and a promise to his mother that he would not pitch on Sundays.



Sportswriter Grantland Rice said Mathewson “handed the game a certain touch of class, an indefinable lift in culture, brains and personality.”

Mathewson’s trail to Saranac Lake began after his playing career had ended and he became manager of the Cincinnati Reds. World War I was raging in Europe and the Germans, French and British had incorporated a deadly new toxin into their arsenals. They were lobbing chlorine, phosgene and mustard gas on the battlefields and trenches. When the United States joined the fighting in April 1917, the top brass decided in summer 1918 to counter the gas attacks by creating a Chemical Warfare Service, regularly known as the Gas and Flame Division.

The concept was to recruit top athletes who could maneuver along battlefields. They would carry gas bombs and strapped flamethrowers to their backs. They would be leading troops into battle after they conducted their own training.

Mathewson felt compelled to join despite the wishes of his wife, Jane. While many major-leaguers were taking jobs in the defense industry and playing an abbreviated 128-game schedule on afternoons and weekends, Mathewson, then 38, resigned with 10 games left in the season and assumed the rank of U.S. Army captain.

He joined other high-powered names. St. Louis Cardinals president Branch Rickey enlisted and recruited St. Louis Browns star George Sisler. Ty Cobb was 31 years old and had just won his 11th batting title when he became Captain Cobb and left the Detroit Tigers for France.

Mathewson caught the flu on the transport ship to France and spent his first 10 days in Europe in the hospital. The future Hall of Famers assembled Nov. 2, 1918 at the 28th Division of the Allied Expeditionary Forces Headquarters in Chaumont, France, 120 miles south of Paris.

The group was conducting training drills with live gas in airtight chambers when Cobb and Mathewson missed a signal to strap on their masks. When the gas was released, chaos reigned and soldiers scrambled to don masks and exit the chamber. Men screamed and arms flailed; the gas covered the room in a shroud. Eight men were killed. Another eight were incapacitated for days.

Historian John Rosengren, writing for the Baseball Hall of Fame, quoted an exchange between Mathewson and Cobb.



Mathewson and Cobb at training headquarters south of Paris.

“Ty, I got a good dose of the stuff,” Mathewson said. “I feel terrible.”

An armistice was declared Nov. 11, 1918 before the Gas and Flame Division ever saw action. Cobb and the other men waited to return to the states. Cobb was still wheezing and coughing when his ship landed in Hoboken, N.J. on Dec. 17. He announced his retirement from baseball, but he felt better in spring and rejoined the Tigers.

Mathewson didn’t have it so easy. He was hospitalized and didn’t leave France until February. He had intended to resume managing the Reds in 1919, but the owner had given away his job. So Mathewson rejoined his old skipper, John McGraw, as assistant manager of the Giants. Mathewson’s lingering

cough from the gas accident persisted, and that led him to Saranac Lake on the border between Essex and Franklin counties.

The village had evolved into a world-renowned center for lung ailments through the work of Dr. Edward Livingston Trudeau. Tuberculosis had killed his brother and, in 1873, Trudeau contracted the disease. He retreated to the Adirondack village in 1876, where he had often hunted and fished as a youth, to attempt a rest cure. He expected to die within months but his health recovered. Within six years, he established the Adirondack Cottage Sanatorium to treat lung ailments and tuberculosis sufferers.

Trudeau reasoned that a series of small cottages would isolate patients and prevent the airborne infections from spreading. Soon, small cottages began popping up around the village. Some homes added glassed-in cure porches to promote rest in sunlight and fresh air.

Telephones lines and railroads reached the village in the mid-1880s, and it became a magnet for the wealthy and famous who could afford the treatment. Scottish novelist Robert Louis Stevenson, author of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, was the first to bring notoriety when he arrived for the 1887-88 winter. Noted poet



Mathewson poses for photographers in Saranac Lake.

and teacher Adelaide Crapsey had rested in her private cottage before returning home to Rochester and passing in 1914. During Mathewson's time in Saranac Lake, the wife of New York politician Fiorella La Guardia, Thea, had arrived in May 1921, but died from TB in November.

While Mathewson was assisting McGraw with the Giants, he often shuttled between New York and Saranac Lake for stays at the Sanatorium until he retired after the 1920 season.

Doctors diagnosed him with tuberculosis in 1921, but they couldn't pinpoint the origin. Mathewson's brother, Henry, had died in 1917 from the disease. Perhaps Christy had been exposed; perhaps the mustard gas had weakened his immune system and led to the disease.

Mathewson returned in 1921 to the village where he had a private cottage built on Park Avenue. He faced the grim prospect that he might die within six weeks.

Similar to Mathewson's case, Word War I had caused another surge in patients. There were about 650 veterans living around Saranac Lake in 1921, prompting the

Veterans Administration to open Sunmount Veterans Hospital in neighboring Tupper Lake.

The rest cure seemed to work for Mathewson. He was on total bed rest and several months passed before he was allowed to sit up.



Mathewson's cottage at 138 Park Avenue in Saranac Lake.

Larry Brunt, writing for the Baseball Hall of Fame, recounted: "In early 1922, he was permitted to go outside and visit a local baseball game where he threw out a ceremonial pitch." The press wanted updates. 'I try to keep cheerful, keep my mind busy, try not to worry and I don't kick on decisions, either by a doctor or an umpire,' Mathewson said. Reporters wanted photos. Mathewson was very reluctant. Just the same, he stood in front of his residence and posed, his lung deflated as part of his treatment, in considerable pain, leaning on a cane."

During the next two years at his mountain retreat, he put together a syndicate to purchase the Boston Braves for \$300,000. The deal was announced Feb. 20, 1923, and Mathewson's role would be team president. But the figurehead position was too great a tax on his health. At spring training in Florida in 1925, he contracted a cold and his cough returned. He headed back to his Saranac Lake cottage and

appeared to be improving as autumn arrived. But as the World Series opened in Pittsburgh on Oct. 7, the end arrived around 11 p.m.



Mathewson is reported to have said during the week before his death, "Now Jane, I want you to go outside and have yourself a good cry. Don't make it a long one; this can't be helped."

Tuberculosis claimed him at age 45. At Forbes Field earlier that day, Mathewson's counterpart, Walter Johnson, had won Game 1. For the rest of the series, the Pirates and Senators donned black armbands.

Mathewson's body was shipped by train to Lewisburg for a funeral two days later. By one account, former New York Giants manager John McGraw,

Mathewson's crusty, belligerent manager, was reduced to tears at the funeral. Mathewson is buried in the cemetery behind Bucknell's Kenneth Langone Athletics and Recreation Center.

The only trace you'll find of Mathewson at the Giants' Oracle Field in San Francisco is a retired jersey on the outfield wall with the initials "NY." Players didn't wear uniform numbers during his career.

Brunt recalled an anecdote from Mathewson's recovery in Saranac Lake. "... he had played catch with some boys. A reporter asked if he had any advice for them. He stopped his throwing and said they should play baseball and learn from it. Then he ended with six words that epitomize his own character: 'Be humble and gentle and kind.' "

Jim Holleran, a Morristown native, is a retired teacher and registrar for the Rochester City School District, and former sports editor of the Democrat and Chronicle. Reach him at jimholleran29@gmail.com or view past columns under Old School Sports Journal at <https://hollerangetsitwrite.files.wordpress.com>