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A passion for the game . . .

Warming up Feller

"HERE, DON, WARM THE KID UP," and with these words Bill Feller threw me a first baseman's mitt. I blinked my eyes as I caught the glove and automatically put it on. This was the Fourth of July in 1935. I was the County Agent at Adel, Iowa, and I was in general charge of the annual Farm Bureau picnic in the Adel City Park. We had many events scheduled for the day's entertainment, and there were committees and committee chairmen for each activity, and my main job was to circulate around the park and see that everything was going off according to schedule. We expected from 5,000 to 8,000 people, according to the weather, and this being a beautiful clear July day, the park was crowded. Earlier in the day, there had been races for the young people, a skillet throwing contest for women, and various other races and softball games. There was a speech by an important politician scheduled for late afternoon, but now at the noon hour we were getting ready for a big ball game.

During the early part of the century, semi-pro baseball had been very popular in the area, and many of the smaller towns had fielded semi-pro teams which played mostly on Sunday afternoons and holidays. Some softball was being played under the lights, but baseball at this time was a daytime activity, and the Fourth of July celebrations always featured baseball games.

Clem Luellen, from Minburn, was in charge of the baseball this year, and we had dreamed up a game that we knew would interest many people. Bobby Feller, from Van Meter, had been an outstanding high school pitcher,

and for several years had been quite a star on a semi-pro team sponsored by his father. At this time, he was 18 years old and had just graduated from high school. Several pro scouts were after him, and later on that summer he was signed by the St. Louis Browns and actually pitched a couple of games. His father's team, with Bobby pitching, was to face a pick-up team featuring Jim Grant . . . who had been a major league pitcher for several years, and was now being very successful in semi-pro ball throughout central Iowa. Most of the players on this team were older and were very familiar to Dallas County baseball fans. I had just wandered over to the baseball diamond to see if the baseball game was going to start on schedule when Bill Feller [threw] me the glove. I knew Bill very well because he was the County Chairman for our wheat committee in Dallas County, and in that capacity, he had spent quite a lot of time in our office. I had seen Bobby play several times, and like everyone who had seen him, was sure he was going places. I had seen him play in a junior American Legion game where Nile Kinnick was catching, and I think that every batter he faced either struck out or walked. He threw hard in those days but tended to be a little wild, and no one who faced him ever stood very close to the plate.

"The catcher was delayed," Bill told me, "and why don't you just warm the kid up til he gets here. It should only be a few minutes."

"I guess I can handle that, Bill, if it won't be too long. Can't you get me a catcher's mitt?"

"The catcher has our only mitt with him. That first base mitt should

do until he gets here." In the meantime, Bobby had put on his spikes, found a ball, and motioned me over alongside of the ball field. I don't remember that he said anything to me. He just started throwing. The first ball that he threw was harder than any ball I had ever caught, and each pitch was a little harder. I am sure that my eyes popped out. I was afraid to catch the ball and afraid not to. If it had ever hit me in a vulnerable spot, I am sure that it would have killed me. I started catching it in the pocket, but after I had caught about three balls, my hand hurt so that I could hardly stand it. My hand then became numb and that helped. I finally tried to catch the ball without ever letting it get into the pocket. Some first basemen were very good at that. Bill, the kid's father, was watching and grinning from ear to ear. I have an idea, and I had it then, that he had taken quite a lot of the same kind of punishment I was taking. After about ten minutes the catcher drove up, and I immediately relinquished my glove.

I can't remember who won the ball game, but I think that it was Bobby's team. None of those older players stood very close to the plate either, for Bobby was wild. In the first major league games he pitched he struck the batters out in record numbers, but he tended to walk quite a few. He became probably the greatest pitcher of all time. ❖

—Excerpt from "Donald and Marian,"
by Don Fish (1994),
State Historical Society of Iowa (Iowa City Library).