

America's "Hurrah Game": Baseball and Walt
Whitman · *Lowell Edwin Folsom*

Passage to India! . . .
Thou rondure of the world at last accomplish'd.
—Walt Whitman, "Passage to India"

IN THE WINTER OF 1888-89, American baseball set out on its own passage to India. Albert G. Spalding, later to become the sporting goods magnate, decided it was time to make a "Base Ball missionary effort" to the world; his enthusiasm for baseball (like his alliteration) was unbounded:

I claim that Base Ball owes its prestige as our National Game to the fact that as no other form of sport it is the exponent of American Courage, Confidence, Combativeness; American Dash, Discipline, Determination; American Energy, Eagerness, Enthusiasm; American Pluck, Persistency, Performance; American Spirit, Sagacity, Success; American Vim, Vigor, Virility.

"Base Ball," concluded Spalding, "is a democratic game." Spalding's later life was dedicated to making sure that baseball would forever be perceived as pristinely American: conceived, developed, and originally played only in the United States. He helped create the Abner Doubleday/Cooperstown immaculate creation-myth of baseball and fought the heresy of baseball's tainted conception (that it had been fathered by the English children's game of "Rounders"). And he believed it was baseball's manifest destiny to export the American way of life to the rest of the earth. So as winter descended on America in 1888, Spalding decided to pack up his successful Chicago White Stockings along with a team of National League all-stars and accomplish the rondure of the world.

American baseball teams had once traveled to England in 1874, but this tour would be the first that faced west from California's shores. Starting from Chicago, the teams played their way across the continent to San Francisco. Then they steamed on to Hawaii, where they arrived a day late, and Sunday blue laws prevented their game from being held. The teams had more success in New Zealand and Australia, where the emulous shouts of thousands cheered them on, and where Spalding announced to the players that they would indeed sail further: completely around the world. They did play in Ceylon, but just missed completing their true passage to India when they were warned that Calcutta was unhealthy; prudently they bypassed that country and traveled on through the Suez Canal. In Egypt, they used one of the Great Pyramids as a

backstop while playing a game in the desert. In Italy they attempted to play in the Colosseum (with Caesar's monument as a backstop), but the Italian government refused, despite Spalding's offer of \$5,000. From there it was on to Paris and a game in the shadows of the Eiffel Tower, then to England where the Prince of Wales politely watched a game and then diplomatically responded: "I consider Base Ball an excellent game; but Cricket a better one." Arriving back in New York, the world-travellers were greeted with a Delmonico's dinner attended by such celebrities as Mark Twain and future-President Theodore Roosevelt.

The baseball ambassadors, relaxed and triumphant, now played their way across the East back to Chicago, stopping off first in Philadelphia for a game and a banquet. Across the Delaware River in Camden, Walt Whitman had been following the tour closely. On the day after the teams steamed into New York harbor and were greeted by hundreds of well-wishers, Whitman discussed the tour with his young friend, Horace Traubel: "Did you see the baseball boys are home from their tour around the world? How I'd like to meet them—talk with them: maybe ask them some questions!" This desire to talk with the athletes who, in America's name, had saluted the world, was an appropriate reaction for Whitman. He had, after all, maintained a lifelong interest in baseball, an interest that is significant because his adult life exactly coincides—geographically and temporally—with the development of American baseball from its birth to its maturity. Whitman, growing up with the sport, eventually came to see baseball as an essential metaphor for America.

Baseball as we know it was born in 1845 with the formation of The Knickerbocker Club in New York, where the first recognizable baseball rules were set down in writing, including a key new rule that prohibited throwing the ball at the runner in order to put him out. This change immediately allowed for the use of the hard, lively ball that altered the nature of the game drastically—speeding things up, increasing distances, requiring quicker reflexes, and promptly turning a children's game into a full-fledged sport.

On June 19, 1846, the Knickerbockers played the first game of baseball (under the new rules) at Elysian Fields in Hoboken. And only a month later Whitman, young editor of *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, wrote an editorial on "Brooklyn Young Men—Athletic Exercises": "In our sun-down perambulations, of late, through the outer parts of Brooklyn, we have observed several parties of youngsters playing 'base,' a certain game of ball. We wish such sights were more common among us. In the practice of athletic and manly sports the young men of nearly all our American cities are very deficient—perhaps more so than any other country that could be mentioned." One can see, even this early on, why more than forty years later Whitman would be excited and proud about America's manly baseball players demonstrating to the world their athletic skills. For in this early editorial Whitman exhorts the youth of the country

to “enjoy life a little. . . . Let us go forth awhile, and get better air in our lungs. Let us leave our close rooms. . . .” Exercise was essential for success on the open road, and of all the forms of sport, Whitman from the start was most attracted to the young game of baseball: “The game of ball is glorious. . . .” As baseball was born, then, it immediately was bound up in Whitman’s mind with qualities he would endorse his whole life—vigor, manliness, al fresco health.

Whitman followed his own advice; he was himself an avid player. His brother George recalled that while Walt generally “cared little for sport,” he still “was an old-fashioned ballplayer and entered into a game heartily enough.” By “old-fashioned,” George probably meant that Walt played “softball” or pre-Knickerbocker baseball—what was sometimes called “Town Ball” or “Boston Ball” (since, in Massachusetts, that form of the game remained more popular than the hardball version until after the Civil War). Whitman had plenty of opportunity to play some version of “Town Ball” with his students while he was teaching school on Long Island in the 1830’s.

In any case, baseball teams multiplied and flourished in New York and Brooklyn after the Knickerbockers got things started. Within a decade Brooklyn had four outstanding clubs—the Excelsiors, Putnams, Eckfords, and Atlantics—and there were over twenty-five well-organized clubs in the New York City area. Indeed, this increasingly popular hardball version of the game came to be known as “New York baseball.” It had begun as a gentlemen’s game, but its demands proved to be democratic; the game insisted on conditioning and skill, not on social breeding. Strong working-class young men quickly became involved, sometimes as “ringers” secretly paid by the gentlemen in the club to improve their chances to win—the first hints of “professional” baseball. Then entire working-class clubs were started in the 1850’s, many formed according to occupation—the firemen with their own club, the barkeepers with theirs. Harry Eckford of Brooklyn, a Scottish immigrant and shipbuilder, molded a young group of mechanics and shipwrights into the very first working-class club, and named them, of course, the Eckfords.

By the 1860’s, the best teams were primarily made up of immigrants and working men. A typical early Brooklyn team, in fact, sounds like something Whitman would have approved of and had faith in; David Voigt, in *American Baseball*, describes the players:

The pitcher was a former stonemason; the catcher, a postal employee; the infielders worked as compositor, machinist, shipping clerk, and compositor. Among the outfielders, two were without previous job experience and the other worked as a compositor. The team substitute once worked as a glass blower.

The occupations listed on early team rosters often read like a Whitmanesque

catalogue of working-class America. And it is not surprising that in “Song of Myself,” after we have been through a catalogue of carpenters, pilots, farmers, printers, machinists, paving-men, canal boys, and conductors, we come upon (in the vast catalogue of canto 33) an image of baseball. At this point, Whitman is “afoot with [his] vision,” spanning the continent with his poetic catalogue, when he records a refreshing group of manly pursuits:

Upon the race-course, or enjoying picnics or jigs or a good game
of base-ball,
At he-festivals, with blackguard gibes, ironical license,
bull-dances, drinking, laughter . . .

So, in 1855, baseball is clearly one of the things Whitman enjoys, and is also one of the distinctive and identifying elements of the American experience that he finds worth absorbing into the song of himself. Growing up and working in Brooklyn, working and living and walking in Manhattan, Whitman found himself in the cradle of baseball while it was developing as a sport and as an institution. And as an editor of several local newspapers, Whitman of course functioned as roving local reporter and at times covered sports. He was one of our first baseball writers. One of his stories—complete with box score—is preserved, an 1858 article he wrote while editing *The Brooklyn Daily Times*. The opening line indicates the frequency with which Whitman attended ball games: “The game played yesterday between the Atlantic and Putnam clubs, on the grounds of the latter Club, was one of the finest and most exciting games we ever witnessed.” Whitman’s account is a careful one, summarizing the action and analyzing the effects of injuries on the hapless Putnam team (including two catchers who were disabled in the course of the game; protective equipment wouldn’t make its appearance for another twenty years). He concludes, “The Atlantics, as usual, played splendidly, and maintained their reputation as the *Champion Club*.” We can imagine why Whitman would admire the Brooklyn Atlantics, a club composed of workingmen with outdoor jobs, and a club that happened to spring into existence the same year *Leaves of Grass* did. These robust players dominated New York-area baseball for years, and gave Brooklyn the reputation of having the best baseball in the country.

When Whitman went to Washington, D.C., at the end of 1862 to look for his brother George, who had been wounded in the war, baseball had preceded him. In 1859 Washington had formed its first two clubs, the Potomacs and the Nationals, both made up of government clerks. Their home field was literally the backyard of the White House. Whitman was not a member of either of these teams, but as a clerk himself (first in the Indian Bureau of the Department of the Interior, then in the Attorney General’s office), he may well have joined in more informal games. His young companion Pete Doyle recalls Walt in the

1860's: "How different Walt was then in Washington from the Walt you knew in later years! . . . He was an athlete—great, great." Whether or not he played, though, he certainly watched. He wrote to John Burroughs in the summer of 1866 of his activities: "I am feeling hearty and in good spirits—go around more than usual—go to such doings as base-ball matches. . . ." The previous summer, the Nationals had hosted a big inter-city tournament, and Whitman was probably one of the 6000 fans there. All government clerks had been let off from work so they could cheer on the clerk-players of the Nationals, and even Andrew Johnson attended. Whitman wrote about the game to one of the soldiers he had nursed: "There was a big match played here yesterday between two baseball clubs, one from Philadelphia & the other a Washington club—& to-day another is to come off between a New York & the Philadelphia club I believe—thousands go to see them play—." The "New York" club Whitman refers to was actually the Brooklyn Atlantics, the same team he had covered a few years before. In fact, the three teams in the tournament—Brooklyn, Washington, and Philadelphia—turned out to represent nicely the span of Whitman's life—Brooklyn, where he had lived, Washington, where he now lived, and Philadelphia, across the river from where he would spend his final nineteen years.

The Civil War, of course, had a tremendous impact on baseball. Some clubs suspended or reduced operations as their players entered service. But in the war itself, baseball played an important role; it was during the Civil War, in fact, that it became the "National game." The "New York" version of baseball caught on among Union soldiers; it was frequently played in camp, and after the war the soldiers took it home with them. Older versions of the sport gave way to New York baseball, which became firmly entrenched as the American game. During the war, it was already popular; a Christmas game in 1862 drew 40,000 soldiers as spectators. Teams from some Union regiments, passing through the capital, even played the Washington Nationals. And Whitman could only have admired his hero-President, Lincoln, all the more for Lincoln's own love of the game—he played baseball, and watched it as well. Confederate troops played the game, too. Baseball even was played in prison camps, with Union prisoners sometimes taking on their Confederate guards. And Albert Spalding makes the claim that, during lulls in battles, Union and Confederate troops occasionally played each other! Spalding, in another of his alliterative flourishes, expresses awe over baseball's effect on the war:

No human mind may measure the blessings conferred by the game of Base Ball on the soldiers of the Civil War. A National Game? Why, no country on the face of the earth ever had a form of sport with so dear a title to that distinction. Base Ball had been born in the brain of an American soldier [in reference to the myth that

Abner Doubleday invented the game]. It received its baptism in bloody days of our Nation's direst danger. It had its early evolution when soldiers, North and South, were striving to forget their foes by cultivating, through this grand game, fraternal friendship with comrades in arms. It had its best development at the time when Southern soldiers, disheartened by distressing defeat, were seeking the solace of something safe and sane; at a time when Northern soldiers, flushed with victory, were yet willing to turn from fighting with bombs and bullets to playing with bat and ball. It was a panacea for the pangs and humiliation to the vanquished on one side, and a sedative against the natural exuberance of the victors on the other. It healed the wounds of war, and was balm to stinging memories. . . .

Spalding goes on and on, finally envisioning the sport as a transcendent "beacon," lighting us all "to a future of perpetual peace."

Bloated as these claims sound, they are in line with those made by many right after the Civil War, and at any rate they hardly outdo Whitman's own growing faith, following the War, in the significance of the game: "I see great things in baseball; it's our game—the American game. It will take our people out of doors, fill them with oxygen, give them a larger physical stoicism. Tend to relieve us from being a nervous, dyspeptic set, repair these losses, and be a blessing to us." Here Whitman brings together his persistent concerns with health, American originality, and preservation of the Union. Baseball was one force that could affirm America's "transcendental Union" (as Whitman called it) and bless the post-war fragile bonding; the sport was also one thing America could claim as her *own*; it was non-European, the *American* game, grown out of this soil.

Even as his own health declined, Whitman's interest in baseball never waned. Nationwide after the Civil War, baseball became increasingly popular and increasingly professional. The Washington Nationals in 1867 headed in the direction of the frontier by sponsoring the first baseball trans-Allegheny tour; they played as far west as St. Louis. Their resounding defeat of the Cincinnati team led to Harry Wright's founding the Cincinnati Red Stockings in 1869, the first all-professional, fully-salaried team. For over a year Wright's team toured the country and was undefeated from New York to San Francisco. Then in 1876, the National League was formed and modern-day baseball was underway. As the game evolved, though, one particular rule change bothered Whitman. Traubel records Whitman's concern in May of 1889; Thomas Harned, a devoted friend, had come to see Walt after attending a baseball game, and Whitman jumped at the chance to talk about the state of the sport:

Tell me, Tom—I want to ask you a question: in base-ball is it the rule that the fellow who pitches the ball aims to pitch it in such a way the batter cannot hit it? Gives it a twist—what not—so it slides off, or won't be struck fairly?

Harned affirmed that this indeed was the case, and Whitman's response indicates how carefully he still followed the game even if he was now too debilitated to attend:

Eh? That's the modern rule then, is it? I thought something of the kind—I read the papers about it—it seemed to indicate that there.

The rule that concerned Whitman has to do with the way the ball could be pitched. The original Knickerbocker rule forbade the *throwing* of the ball; instead, the ball had to be pitched underhand, smoothly, so that the batter could hit it. This rule had been refined over the years, first requiring that the hand not be raised above the hip, then requiring only that the hand pass below the hip as the ball was pitched, then only below the waist, then the shoulder (allowing for side-arm pitching). Originally, then, the pitcher's function was simply to put the ball in play by allowing the hitter to hit it; one player usually pitched all the games. But as the skills of the players became more refined, the pitcher's role became more strategic. In 1884 the National League removed all restrictions on a pitcher's delivery. The curve ball, which occasionally had been accomplished underhand-style in the 1870's, now became a requisite skill. Whitman, however, was not impressed with this new skill and saw the rule change as endemic of the deception and lack of openness he saw creeping everywhere into America; we can hear echoes of the anger and despair of "Democratic Vistas" in his response to Harned, "denounc[ing] the custom roundly," as Traubel tells us:

"The wolf, the snake, the cur, the sneak all seem entered into the modern sportsman—though I ought not to say that, for a snake is a snake because he is born so, and man the snake for other reasons, it may be said." And again he went over the catalogue—"I should call it everything that is damnable."

Harned is described as "amused" at Whitman's response, but Whitman seems in earnest. He has obviously had the matter on his mind for some time and has engaged in some lively debate about it: "I have made it a point to put the same question to several fellows lately. There certainly seems no doubt but that your version is right, for that is the version everyone gives me." It's as if Whitman keeps hoping someone will "say it ain't so," will affirm for him that

baseball remains the fair and open and democratic game that he recalled it to be. Whitman already sensed the dangers that would come: the game becoming anti-democratic, the pampered pitcher rising above his teammates and playing only once every five days or so (indeed, it has come to pass that—with the arm-mangling magic of screwballs, forkballs, knuckleballs, and hundred-mile-an-hour fastballs—pitching is now the predominant factor in the game).

Despite his fears, though, Whitman managed to hold on to an idyllic vision of the game—baseball as something essentially bound up with the best of America. Traubel, for example, recalls Whitman talking about one of his favorite topics in the last years—the idea of “free Sundays,” with no blue law restrictions on activities:

Talking of Sunday agitation generally and Gloucester [New Jersey] baseball in particular W. said: “I believe in all that—in baseball, in picnics, in freedom: I believe in the jolly all-around time—with the parsons and the police eliminated.”

Later the same summer, Traubel records that “W. believes in ‘free Sundays. The boys should have their ball or any frolic they choose. . . .’ ” Whitman here gives early voice to what would become an American cliché: “Baseball, picnics, and freedom” formed a commonplace nexus of American values.

It’s useless, of course, to speculate who the “several fellows” might have been whom Whitman talked baseball with in his last years, but one fascinating hint does exist. Several times during 1888 Horace Traubel records visits from a Harry Wright, always without comment (except once, when Whitman was irritated that Wright had stayed too long), and in Whitman’s Daybook for 1885, Walt records, on January 25: “Sunday, visit from Harry Wright.” As with Traubel’s references, there is no further comment that might help identify this man, and he has in fact remained unidentified in Whitman scholarship. It’s interesting, though, that Traubel drops Wright’s name as if he is someone the reader probably would know. And there *was* one Harry Wright in the Camden area in the 1880’s whose name would have needed no gloss; this was William Henry Wright—known to everyone as Harry—a fine player and, as we have seen, the founder of the first professional baseball team, the Cincinnati Red Stockings. After his playing days, he continued in baseball as a manager and finally as chief of the umpires for the National League. From 1884-1893 (Whitman bought his house on Mickle Street in Camden in 1884 and lived there until his death in 1892) he was the prominent manager of Philadelphia’s best baseball team, the National League Athletics. He was one of the special guests at that Philadelphia dinner honoring the world-touring baseball players on their return to America in 1889; he talked to the players Whitman wanted so much to talk to himself. When we consider Whitman’s

fondness for, interest in, and belief in the game of baseball, it at least seems fitting that Harry Wright would have been among the well-known people who crossed the Delaware to visit Whitman on Mickle Street.

Whether or not he knew baseball's Harry Wright, though, there's no doubt that by the 1880's baseball had entered Whitman's very way of thinking. The democratic American game furnished him with figures of speech he seemed especially fond of, and his conversations with Traubel are peppered with baseball terms. So when he wanted to express admiration for a particularly effective passage written by William O'Connor, Whitman evoked baseball's supreme offensive achievement, the home run: "That's a home stroke. . . . O William: you can hit a thing like that off with absolute finality." He seemed attracted to baseball metaphors for their colorful, direct, and simple expressiveness. He even refers to his own writing techniques in terms of baseball, telling Traubel, for example, "That has mainly been my method: I have caught much on the fly: things as they come and go—on the spur of the moment." And Traubel uses the same image to evoke some of his more fragmented conversations with Whitman: "Two or three things I caught from W. on the fly, as I busied about the room." At that time, "on the fly" was an important new baseball term, since the original Knickerbocker rules in 1845 allowed for an out if the ball was caught "on the first bound." Only gradually did this rule change; for years, teams would stipulate whether or not the games they played would be "on the fly" or "on the bound." If players chose to play on the fly, they had to be especially awake and alert, awaiting the unexpected. So Whitman probably did not mean to imply, with the figure of speech, casualness about his poetic methods so much as alertness combined with an element of surprise: his method was to be awake for every opportunity that came his way, to "catch much on the fly."

Once when discussing plans for an edition of his complete poetry and prose with Traubel, Whitman began to wonder about a new preface for the book. He wavered about whether or not one was needed. Finally he fell back on a baseball story to help him make up his mind: "My hesitations make me think of a story. The captain of a baseball nine was to be presented with a silver pitcher." Whitman goes on to tell how the captain and the club spokesman both prepared long speeches for the occasion, but when the presentation ceremony came, both men forgot them: "they flustered about, wondering what to do—then finally retreated to first causes, to their simple human nature—the spokesman exclaiming: 'Captain, here's the pitcher!' and the captain exclaiming: 'Is *that* the pitcher?' So the affair was a success after all, though not according to the rule set." Whitman of course admired this open honesty, this simple unadorned speech from the heart, displacing set rules and rehearsed elegance; his poetry, after all, had set out to do the same thing. Here, then, was the simple good humor and straightforwardness of the young American athlete, and

Whitman decided to emulate this baseball player's way of speaking in his own writing:

I guess I'll have to model my preface on that incident—and if the preface is half as successful as the incident I'll be satisfied. "Captain, here's the preface!" "Is *that* the preface?" We want to get the pitcher into the right hands—that's the whole object.

In recent years there's been a lot of serious talk about baseball. Scholars have examined the sport as an analogue to American history or as a way of understanding the American character; David Q. Voigt in *America Through Baseball*, for example, investigates the sport in relation to American nationalism, America's sense of mission, American racism and the union ethic. And George Grella, in his essay on "Baseball and the American Dream," makes perhaps the broadest claim:

Occupying a unique place in our national heritage, this most American of sports speaks as few other human activities can to our country's sense of itself. . . . The game is as instructive, as beautiful, and as profound as the most significant aspects of American culture. . . . Anyone who does not understand the game cannot hope to understand the country.

Many of this country's best writers would seem to agree; Stephen Crane was a first-rate ball player, and authors as diverse as Marianne Moore, William Carlos Williams, James T. Farrell, Ring Lardner, Zane Grey, Thomas Wolfe, Ernest Hemingway, Bernard Malamud, Wright Morris, Robert Coover, John Updike, and Philip Roth, all have used baseball as a major image at one time or another. They are not alone: Anton Grobani's bibliography, *Guide to Baseball Literature*, runs to three hundred pages and thousands of entries. As Robert Frost said, "some baseball is the fate of us all." It's important, then, to realize that Walt Whitman, our most essentially American poet, was one of the first of our writers—perhaps *the* first—to recognize the vital significance of baseball to America. Traubel once called it "the hurrah game of the republic," and Whitman, in good humor, responded:

That's beautiful: the hurrah game! well—it's our game: that's the chief fact in connection with it: America's game: has the snap, go, fling, of the American atmosphere—belongs as much to our institutions, fits into them as significantly, as our constitutions, laws: is just as important in the sum total of our historic life.

No writer since has exceeded these extravagant and fervent claims for the game. Whitman's baseball credo could only have been spoken by a man who grew up with the sport; saw it develop from its slower, more sedate forms into a demanding game of hardball with "snap and go"; saw the democratic demands of skill force gentlemen to give way to the young roughs; saw the baseball team itself become an image of America, accepting and absorbing men from all walks of life, immigrants from all over the world, molding them into one body, a union committed to a common purpose; saw the sport, starting from Manhattan, spread westward and eventually be played from coast to coast, affirming America's secure occupation of the continent; saw baseball, finally, become an athletic image of his soul, accomplishing the rondure of the world, spreading "America's game" and "the American atmosphere" to Australia, Asia, Africa, and Europe, then returning home in triumph and comradeship. Whitman had often prophesied the eventual completion of America's continental manifest destiny: "Long ere the second centennial arrives, there will be some forty to fifty great States, among them Canada and Cuba." Our Bicentennial has passed, and baseball even helped salvage this prophesy. Had he lived on into the twentieth century, Whitman would have seen American baseball first make the ultimate confirmation of manifest destiny by resettling the Brooklyn Dodgers and the New York Giants in Los Angeles and San Francisco, while it also reached south to Cuba for some of its finest players and then went north to absorb Canada, uniting Montreal—however improbably—into the *National League* and assimilating Toronto into the *American*. All this was set in motion the year after Whitman's death when the Western League, progenitor of today's American League, was organized, and twentieth century baseball was on its way. The sport had begun its acceleration into big business: the year before Whitman's death the militant National Brotherhood of Baseball Players deserted the National League and began their own ill-fated league; it was the first bitter battle between management and players. As Whitman died, the country marked the end of what would come to be known as the Golden Era of baseball.

Bibliographic Note

Albert Spalding's comments are taken from his book, *America's National Game* (New York: American Sports Publishing Company, 1911)—Spalding's biased but fascinating history of baseball. More reliable histories of baseball's beginnings are Harold Seymour's *Baseball: The Early Years* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960) and David Quentin Voigt's *American Baseball* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1966). Arthur Bartlett's *Baseball and Mr. Spalding* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Young, 1951) contains useful information and anecdotes

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moment in Boston, Whitman spoke of football with the kind of rapture that he usually saves for baseball (see Clifton Joseph Furness, "Walt Whitman Looks at Boston," *New England Quarterly*, I [1928], 358).