

Documenting the Roar of the Tiger: John E. Fetzer, Major League Baseball and a Game in Flux

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The Fetzer Institute is a non-profit research and educational organization dedicated to pursuing the implications of mind-body-spirit unity in a variety of areas. As the Institute's Archivist/Records Manager I wear many hats, from establishing a records management program to overseeing office technology to creating an organizational archives. I came to the Institute in June, 1994 to arrange and describe the business and personal papers of the Institute's founder John E. Fetzer (1901-1991).

The John E. Fetzer Collection documents Fetzer's pioneering work in broadcasting, his community involvement, and the creation of the Institute. A significant portion of the collection is devoted to a passion that Fetzer had since he was a little boy in Lafayette, Indiana - baseball, and in particular, the Detroit Tigers.

Fetzer turned a childhood dream into reality in 1956 when he became part of an 11-man group that bought the Detroit Tigers. By 1962 he had acquired sole ownership of the team, which he retained until 1983 when he sold the club. After the sale Fetzer stayed on as Chairman of the Board until early 1990.

Fetzer also served baseball as whole during his association with the Tigers. He was a member of Major League Baseball's executive committee, its pension committee, and both the American League and Major League Baseball television committees. As head of the Major League Baseball television committee, Fetzer helped put together the baseball's

first national television contract, a milestone whose ramifications changed the very core of the game. The Fetzer Collection documents all these activities and more.

The View from the Owners Seat

The baseball portion of the Fetzer Collection consists of 31 ln.ft. of manuscript material, one ln.ft. of photographs, and numerous artifacts. The manuscript material provides an excellent picture of the operation of a major league ball club and baseball as a whole during a period of tremendous change. It documents the upper level administration and general policies of the ball club and the stadium. These records reflect Fetzer's philosophy of ownership, which was to delegate daily operational issues of the club to the general manager.

The records themselves consist of such items as American League Meeting Minutes, weekly reports on the operation of the club from the Tigers general manager and others, and publications (including yearbooks.) The photographs document some of the organization's facilities and events over the years. Such standard items such as autographed balls and bats make up the bulk of the artifacts, but there are also two very rare pieces - the 1968 and 1984 World Series trophies.

The Fetzer Collection is not the only repository to possess records created by the Detroit Tigers during the period of Fetzer's ownership. The team's current owners, Mike and Marion Hillitch (who purchased the team in 1992), has a wide variety of materials dating to the early 1900s. The

archivist for the Tigers is currently reviewing and organizing the collection, and still has a large amount of unprocessed material. I hope that this material contains those records that the Fetzer Collection does not have (detailed financial and thy-to-day documentation,) as well as the originals of duplicate records in the Collection. I have also contacted other institutions seeking information on what material may have on Fetzer's ownership of the Tigers. In particular I have worked with the archivists at the National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum and the Sporting News not only to unearth relevant material but as a form of outreach. I want them to feel comfortable in contacting me for any information that they may need on Fetzer and his activities.

Interactive Archiving

A goal I have for the Fetzer Collection is to use it as a base for educational outreach to inform the general public of the accomplishments of John Fetzer. Through this outreach the Institute hopes to increase public interest in Fetzer, and thus increase interest in and acceptance of the Institute and its work. Baseball, because of its place in American culture, provides a perfect gateway for this outreach. Currently, the collection is being used in two projects funded by the Institute: an oral history and a book. The oral history will document all of the major aspects of Fetzer's life, including baseball. The book is more narrowly focused, examining Fetzer's baseball activities and in particular his philosophy of ownership. The oral history will supplement documents already in the archives, while the book is for

the baseball fan interested in reading about an old fashioned owner.

In the future the plan is to use the collection again as a base for other outreach projects. One of the ideas in the works is to partner with a cable network to put together a biographical documentary on Fetzter. Also we want to upgrade an exhibit on Fetzter's life and accomplishments at Western Michigan University's Fetzter Center. Currently the exhibit only covers Fetzter's life to 1984, leaving an incomplete picture. In both projects, baseball would be a significant part of the final product, and the documents in the Collection will provide the factual base for a visual end product.

The Past as a Compass for the Future

All of this outreach about John E. Fetzter comes from the Institute's sense of history. To the Institute it is important to know its past in order to help provide direction for the future. On several occasions I have had requests from the staff to search the Collection for information on past activities and quotations illustrating Fetzter's views and feelings on various topics relating to the work of the Institute.

Because the Institute values its past, and it is a well-endowed organization, my work in the archives is well-supported both professionally and financially. I have gotten an excellent archival and records storage facility, the ability to attend several professional meetings a year, and support for my work from the President on down through the staff. Because I know how rare this level of support is, I value it even more, and I exercise responsibility in order not to abuse the advantages given to me.

An Archives on a Mission

The John E. Fetzter Collection is currently closed to outside researchers because I still have material to process and have not yet fully developed access policies for the archives. When this work is completed, hopefully before the end of 1996, I expect the baseball material will be the most utilized part of the collection because of America's fascination with the game.

It is this fascination that makes The Fetzter Collection a significant holding. The Collection's baseball material offers a window to a time when the game went from the national pastime, still full of wonder and innocence, to a troubled business torn apart by strife and greed, searching for an identity. Through this collection I hope researchers can achieve a better understanding of why baseball changed, and whether or not it can ever regain some of its lost glory.