

The Legend Schang Built

By Wes Goforth

Unless they know the details, visitors to the Dixon Cemetery might raise an eyebrow when they spot a curious gravestone sitting roughly in the middle of the grounds. A pair of baseballs are etched into the marble marker, flanking an engraved baseball catcher fully uniformed and crouched, as if ready to receive a pitch. Friends who knew the couple interred there muse with the memories. A little delving into history might bring a smile to the faces of all others. That stone marks the resting place of a now legendary transplant to mid Missouri and his wife, a Dixon native. Wally Schang married Dorothy Batty in St. Louis in 1929. They bought her parents' farm south of Dixon and made it their home the rest of their lives. When they met, Dorothy was a hairdresser in St. Louis. Wally played ball for the St. Louis Browns. "He'll be 38 years old August 22, a very old man as baseball players are judged," wrote reporter Harry Brundage in 1927. "But he's just a kid, with a lot of good baseball

years ahead of him, his nearly bald head notwithstanding, for he loves baseball, and lives for it alone." The truth is, Schang's greatest major league years were far gone. But he'd just begun to craft out decades of baseball lore in central Missouri. Schang played his boyhood games on a rural field near Buffalo, New York, just a couple of miles down a mountain from the farm home where he was born in 1889. He was a quiet lad and a natural athlete. He played semi-pro ball as a teenager and by 1912, made the Buffalo Bisons of the International League. In just one year of pro ball, he impressed numerous big league managers including Connie Mack of the Philadelphia Athletics. Mack drafted Schang in the winter of 1912. Things began to happen quickly for the young man. Mack had assembled a team which included two future hall of fame infielders Frank "Home Run" Baker at third base and Eddie Collins at second. Three more future hall of famers—Chief Bender, Eddie Plank, and Herb Pennock—made Mack's pitching staff the envy of the majors. But he had



Wally Schang's tombstone in the cemetery in Dixon quietly reminds visitors of his remarkable baseball legacy. Courtesy of Ray Don Baker.

one dire weakness at catcher. At Bender's suggestion, Mack gave Schang his first major league start late that spring. Schang went 2-for-3 and scored twice. Bender threw a 2-hit shutout and beat the Browns 5-0. Schang would hit .266 his rookie year. Defensively, he threw out half the runners who tried to steal

on him. He finished eighth in the balloting for MVP in the American League. The A's went on to win the World Series, beating John McGraw, Christy Mathewson and the New York Giants in five games. Schang's winning share of \$3,200 more than tripled his \$1,000 salary. By the next winter, Schang was a hometown, if not national,

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hero. The kid from upstate New York wore a mink coat as limousines carried him and his teammates in the parade through the streets of Philadelphia. His first boss, author Elbert Hubbard, who owned the semipro Roycroft Club of East Aurora, New York, welcomed Schang back home with a huge banquet in his honor. Wally Schang's next brush with baseball immortality would happen in the spring of 1915. In one game, he gunned down six runners trying to steal. It's the American League record to this day. The next fall, Schang made history with his bat. He became the first player ever to homer from both sides of the plate in a single game. Batting lefthanded, he hit a grand slam in the first inning. He hit a solo shot batting righthanded in the second. The A's beat the visiting Yankees, 8-2 at Shibe Park in Philadelphia. Though impressed with Schang's prowess behind the plate, Mack experimented with his young star. Schang played several games in the outfield and was the A's regular third baseman in 1915. After the 1917 season, Mack traded Schang to the Boston Red. As he'd done in Philadelphia, the young catcher would help bring quick success. The pitching staff he handled in beantown included "Sad" Sam

Jones, Carl Mays--the sport's only "submarine" pitcher at the time, and a future outfielder named Babe Ruth. Boston beat the Cubs, 4-2 in the World Series. Schang led the team with a .444 batting average. The Red Sox haven't won a World Series since. It was during the 1918 World Series that Schang would again find himself making baseball history. Game five was delayed for about an hour while players from both teams staged an informal picket line outside Boston's Fenway Park. They objected to decreased player shares. The strategy backfired. Complaints of greed ensued and attendance for the Series dropped, contributing to an even further reduction in the players' shares. Schang and his teammates received \$1,100 apiece and each losing Cub got \$670, the smallest financial rewards of any World Series. Because of baseball's first "strike," the commissioner's office denied players their World Series Championship pendants. Red Sox owner Harry Frazee soon amassed huge debt in the theatrical industry. Like Connie Mack did with his A's a few years earlier, Frazee began to reduce his payroll. He sold rights to some players and traded others for players with smaller salaries.



Schang enjoyed some of his best years behind the plate for the Yankees. Courtesy of Ray Don Baker.

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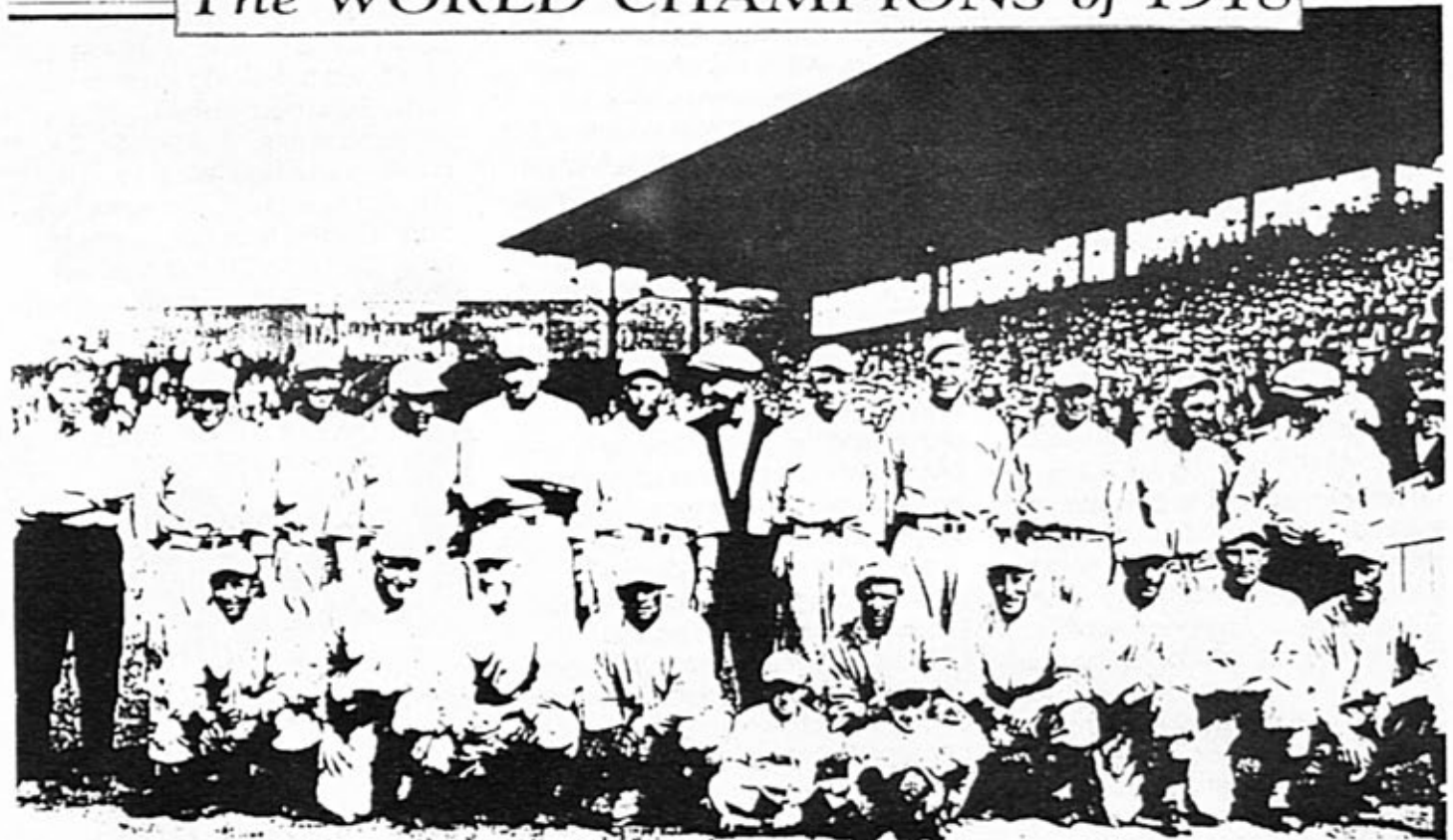
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Before the 1920 season, Frazee sold Ruth to the Yankees for \$100,000 cash and a \$300,000 mortgage on Fenway Park. A year later, as Wally Schang entered his prime, Frazee traded him to the Yankees, reuniting Schang with Ruth. Led by a host of budding young players, the Yankees won their first-ever league championship in 1921. They lost the World Series to the Giants. Schang's .286 Series average led all Yankee hitters. The Giants took the Series from the Yankees again in 1922. But 1923 would provide Schang's next momentous occasions. The Yankees and Giants had shared the Polo Grounds as their home. But the arrival of Ruth in 1920 and two straight World Series appearances caused revenues to swell for the pinstripers. Huge profits encouraged the owners to build a new stadium across the river in the Bronx. On April 18, 1923, the team christened Yankee Stadium. Moments after catching the ceremonial first pitch from New York Governor Al Smith, Wally Schang would catch the first major league pitch ever thrown in the "House that Ruth Built." Ruth hit a three-run homer en route to a 4-1 Yankees win over the Red Sox.

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Bruised ribs and a severe groin injury forced Schang to miss nearly half of the 1923 season. But by World Series time, he was ready to meet the archrival Giants for a third straight year. He caught all six games, again led the team with a .318 batting average, and helped the Yankees win their first World Series. In so doing, Wally Schang became the first player ever to win World Series Championships with three different teams. Schang never played in another World Series. With his offensive numbers diminishing, he was traded to the St. Louis Browns in 1926. Ironically, he hit .330 that season the highest average of his career. He played four years in St. Louis, followed by a year back with the Philadelphia A's and a final big league campaign with the Detroit Tigers in 1931. The years of the Great Depression saw Wally earn a living the only way he knew how by farming and playing baseball. He sold firewood and farmed his land near Dixon. He played minor league ball for four years before returning to the big leagues as pitching coach for the Cleveland Indians in 1936. For the next three years, he roomed with and taught his trade to an Iowa farm kid named Bob Feller. In 1994, Feller wrote, "Wally Schang was a great baseball person, a very good

catcher, my dear friend, and should be in the Hall of Fame." Though he would get out of baseball, baseball never got out of Wally Schang. He played minor league ball across the U.S. and even in Canada until he was in his mid 50's. Back in Dixon, he played for the town team and coached youngsters every year. The easy-going, bowlegged old hero made countless numbers of friends in Missouri. The kid who played baseball on the sandlots south of Buffalo played lots of golf in his latter years on the sand greens at Dixon's Oak Hills Country Club. He taught young catchers, including this author, to catch with their right hands clenched in a fist behind their backs. One look at Wally's own fingers, gnarled by innumerable foul tips and 55-foot fastballs, convinced most to comply. Wally died in a St. Louis hospital March 6, 1965. He would never know that he finally got that 1918 World Series pendant. Baseball commissioners through Bowie Kuhn in 1970 denied requests. But in 1992, with pressure from the Red Sox and New England Sport magazine, Major League Baseball agreed to honor the 1918 World Champions on the 75th anniversary of their victory. Wally's last living sibling,

94-year-old brother Quirin, received it in a Buffalo area nursing home. When Quirin Schang died two years later, it was passed down to his son Jack. There's plenty left to tell and learn about Wally Schang. Many Dixonites still remember him. Ask Ray D. Baker about how Wally virtually treated him as the son he never had. Or Fred Max Hauck about Wally's reaction the day Babe Ruth died. Or Mary Jo Clark about Wally's antics on the golf course. Or Howard Wolf, Sr. about playing ball with the man who played with Babe Ruth. Or maybe you'd just like to drive by that unique tombstone and ponder for a moment, now that you, too, know what the baseballs and the catcher on it are all about.

Wally Schang's Career Highlights

(May 12, 1915: Threw out American League record six runners trying to steal in a single game.

(September 8, 1916: Became first major leaguer to hit home runs from both sides of the plate in the same game.

(September 10, 1918: Helped staged first-ever baseball strike. Picketed outside Fenway Park against cut in World Series share money, before Game 5 of the World Series.

(April 18, 1923: Caught first pitch ever thrown and first game played at Yankee Stadium.

(October 15, 1923: Became first major leaguer to win World Series Championships with three different teams.

Special thanks to Mr. Jim Sargent for some of the facts and quotes researched for this article.

(June 9, 1913: First major league start. Caught Hall of Fame pitcher Chief Bender's 2-hit shutout of St. Louis Browns.

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