



Across the Fence

By Howard Sherpe

Field of Dreams

As anyone knows who's been reading this column since it began, I never became the next Warren Spahn. But I didn't let that stop me from wanting to experience the "Field of Dreams" in Dyersville, Iowa.

The movie, "Field of Dreams," released in 1989, was an Academy Award nominee for Best Picture of the Year. There is something about the movie that has tugged at the heart-strings of millions of people. It's a film that mixes reality with fantasy and where dreams come true. As their brochure says, "People are drawn here (to the movie site) for reasons they can't explain."

A line from the movie says, "If you build it they will come." And come they do, to Heaven... I mean Iowa. They "Go the distance."

Last September, Linda, our daughter Amy, and I went the distance from Madison to Dyersville. For reasons I can't explain either, we wanted to experience the Field of Dreams.

There's a magic that begins as soon as you turn into the driveway and see the familiar white house and the baseball diamond with the cornfield at the edge of the outfield. You half expect the Ghost Team to suddenly emerge from the corn.

I couldn't take a trip to the Field of Dreams without three essential items... a bat, a ball, and a glove. Not just any bat, ball, and glove, but some real antiques.

Let's take the baseball first. It's just a plain old scruffy baseball, but I've had it for years.

My left-handed Gil McDougald glove is old... downright ancient, almost as old as I am. I got it in grade school and it's the only glove I've ever had. The padding is pretty much worn out but it's still functional. It saw

action in countless ballgames at Smith School and 4-H softball games with the Seas Branch Smithies. It's the same glove I used during my famous, or is that infamous, pitching debut in Westby. If you read my story, "The Next Warren Spahn," you know I threw one strike... unfortunately it went for a home run! Yes, that old glove has quite a history and it had to make the trip to the Field of Dreams.

And then there's my old Louisville Slugger... the bat that almost got away. I've also had that bat since grade school. It still has black tape wrapped around the handle for a better grip. I wonder if that would be considered legal in this day of "steroid baseball?"

As I mentioned, I almost lost my old bat. It was the day of the auction after our parents died, a cold, rainy, miserable August day. I had set three old bats aside that weren't being sold. However, someone had thrown them on a wagon. We were pulling another wagon toward the shed, where the auction was being conducted out of the rain, when I saw the auctioneer, Gary Olerud, hold up the three bats. I panicked, ran to the shed, and waved my hands frantically to place a bid. Thank heavens there was little interest in the old wooden bats. I got all three for \$2.00 and breathed a sigh of relief. My Louisville Slugger was saved and also made the trip to Dyersville with us.

After we arrived, we wandered around the grounds. Several people were playing catch in the infield so we headed to right field.

I had to use all the famous lines from the movie, so I asked Amy, "Do you want to have a catch?" We played catch in the outfield, next to the cornfield for a while. Then Linda and I had a catch!

Of course we had to reach into the cornfield, then jerk our hand back, and

chuckle like James Earl Jones did in the movie. Then we walked into the cornfield and disappeared, just like he and the Ghost Players did. Luckily we were able to reappear again. I won't tell you what we experienced in the cornfield. You'll have to go there and find out for yourself.

We sat on the wood bleachers, on a beautiful fall afternoon, and watched families playing ball together, having a catch, and hitting the ball. I sat on the end of the lower bleacher where James Earl Jones sat when he uttered his famous lines... "The one constant through all the years, Ray, has been baseball. America has rolled by like an army of steamrollers. It's been erased like a blackboard, rebuilt, and erased again. But baseball has marked the time. This field, this game, is a part of our past, Ray. It reminds us of all that once was good, and it could be again. Ohhhhhhhh, people will come, Ray. People will most definitely come."

Yes, people do come, just as we did. They come to experience some of the magic of a simpler time, a time when parents and children had a catch together; when they sat on simple wood bleachers and watched the local team play ball. They come to experience the magic of walking into the cornfield. They come to experience reality and fantasy all rolled into one. They bring their old bats and gloves and use muscles they had forgotten about.

For a few magic moments they are kids again; they have a catch with their kids; they swing old bats and hit old baseballs. Yes, I even connected on a pitch with my old Louisville Slugger.

Was it Heaven? No, it was The Field of Dreams in Dyersville, Iowa, but for a moment in time, it was as close to Heaven as you can get, and life was good... life was very good!