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Moonlight Graham's Legend Lingers On

By THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

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His big league career lasted all of one game, a few fleeting moments in right field. He stood out there on a summer afternoon so long ago, on a patch of grass since paved over in Brooklyn.

Yet many folks are certain Moonlight Graham was a made-up character from a movie, not a real-life ballplayer for the New York Giants.

"'Field of Dreams' was before my time," said Willie Mays, the greatest Giant of them all. "That was a real thing? How come nobody told me?"

Yet the tale is true, at least most of it. Because on June 29, 1905 -- exactly 100 years ago on Wednesday -- Archibald Wright Graham made his lone appearance in the majors.

He never got to hit. Instead, he was left on deck. A late substitute in a lopsided 11-1 win, he played only two innings and there's no proof he ever touched the ball.

"Graham went to right field for New York" was his only mention in the local Evening Telegram's play-by-play account. And, just that fast, the 28-year-old rookie described in the sporting press as being "quick as a flash of moonlight" was gone.

No wonder it took quite a while for his story to get around -- and for author W.P. Kinsella to make Graham such a part of the poetry and romance that celebrate the lore and lure of baseball.

More than a decade after Graham died in 1965, the prize-winning author was leafing through the Baseball Encyclopedia that his father-in-law had given him for Christmas a few days earlier. Among the listings for every player and their lifetime stats, Kinsella came across something that stopped him.

"I found this entry for Moonlight Graham. How could anyone come up with that nickname? He played one game but did not get to bat. I was intrigued, and I made a note that I intended to write something about him," he said.

A few years later, he did. His 1982 novel "Shoeless Joe" was adapted into the 1989 film "Field of Dreams," and Moonlight was reborn.

Eventually, there was a band called Moonlight Graham, a couple of Web sites were dedicated to him and a scholarship fund established in his honor.

"I didn't anticipate this happening," Kinsella said in a telephone interview from his home in British Columbia.

In the movie, Graham mystically flickers onto the scoreboard at Fenway Park. Seeking one at-bat in the bigs, he asks: "Is there enough magic out there in the moonlight to make dreams come true?"

Veda Ponikvar knew Graham for almost a half-century in Chisholm, Minn. He arrived around 1912 after the town placed a newspaper ad for a school doctor, and Ponikvar said he never boasted about his ballplaying.

Or explained his enchanting nickname.

"I think it was because by the light of the moon, he practiced his game," she guessed. "But some people said it was because he moonlighted as a doctor."

No matter, she said, Burt Lancaster's kindly portrayal was perfect.

"I remember probably in the third grade when he inoculated me for scarlet fever," she said. "I still have the mark on my arm. Growing up, I thought it was the most horrible thing. Later on, I thought, 'Oh, Doc Graham, you're pretty precious. You left your mark.'"

Now in her mid-80s, she'll be at the Metrodome this Wednesday to throw out the first ball before Kansas City plays Minnesota on Moonlight Graham Day.

All because of sheer luck.

When Kinsella thumbed through the Baseball Encyclopedia, he could've easily turned to the pages for Twink Twining, Goat Cochran or Steamboat Struss. Of the more than 16,000 players in major league history, they're also among the 900-plus guys in the Elias Sports Bureau registry who got into only one game.

"I had no backup," Kinsella said. "My approach to fiction writing is that when I need facts, I invent them. So I would have invented a background for Moonlight Graham, but I'm sure nothing as wonderful as the truth.

"It was a gold mine."

OK, so what if he really didn't play on the last day of the 1922 season, as in the movie? Or that he batted left-handed, rather than righty in the film? Or that he got sent down after his one big league game and spent three more years in the minors?

Those blue hats he bought for his wife, Alecia? "Absolutely true," Ponikvar said. And the way he patted children to clear food stuck in their throats? "He did it to me," she said.

Oh, another fact: His younger brother, Frank Porter Graham, was a U.S. senator from North Carolina.

In all, it's a story that fans everywhere embraced. Well, most everyone.

"I didn't see 'Field of Dreams.' I don't watch movies about what I do," San Francisco slugger Barry Bonds said.

On the other hand, Los Angeles Angels star Darin Erstad estimated he's watched it 20 to 30 times.

"It's a special thing because it's a dream of a lot of kids out there, to have the opportunity to put on a big league uniform for just that one time. And that part of the movie really summed that up," he said.

"When you see guys who are career minor leaguers who get an opportunity to come up -- and even if they're not up for a long time -- they can always say that all that hard work they put in was worth it."

It was for Bob Hegman and Gary Hargis.

Hegman's one big league game came in August 1985, when he replaced George Brett in the Kansas City infield for the ninth inning.

"You wait so long, all your life for that moment. Just running on the field, it was surreal," said Hegman, now an advance scout for the Twins.

The Royals went on to win the World Series that year, and they remembered him. Sort of, anyway.

"Everybody asks, 'Did you get a ring? Did you get a ring?'" he said. "Heck, all I got was a \$100 check. I wish I'd kept it and framed it, but I needed to eat."

Called up in September 1979, Hargis made his lone appearance as a pinch-runner for Pittsburgh on the next-to-last day of the season.

"You keep thinking, 'Just let me get in one game so my name can get into the book,'" he said. "When you do, it's just like the movie. Your eyes light up, you never want the night to end. You just want to play ball, like you did when you were a kid."

At least Kevin Morgan got to bat. After "floating to the plate," he popped up in 1997 for the New York Mets.

"I definitely thought there would be more opportunities," said Morgan, the Mets' director of minor league operations, "but as it turned out, that was the only one."

Which is more than Mickey Harrington got in his one game with Philadelphia in 1963.

"I was expecting to at least get an at-bat," he said. "I was 6-foot-4, 205 pounds and it was disappointing to be used as a pinch-runner. I figured someone else would pick me up and I'd get another chance, but I never did."

Archie Graham never got to bat in the majors, either.

A pretty good hitter for three years in the minors, Giants manager John McGraw invited him to spring training in 1905, but Graham declined because he wanted to finish medical school. According to extensive work by Bill Moose for the Society for American Baseball Research, Graham finally joined the Giants on May 23.

Five weeks later, he made his debut at Brooklyn's Washington Park -- built before Ebbets Field, it's now a depot for the Con Edison power company.

In a game against the Superbas -- the forerunners of the Dodgers -- Graham replaced George Browne in right field for the bottom of the eighth inning. Nothing was hit his way.

Then he was left on deck in the ninth when pitcher Claude Elliott flied out. In the bottom half, Graham may have gotten a play.

Switch-hitter Charlie Malay singled -- presumably, he was batting lefty against the righty Elliott -- and perhaps he pulled it in Graham's direction. But there's simply no record of where the ball went.

"It's possible that maybe he touched it," Moose said. "No telling for sure."

AP Sports Writer Janie McCauley and AP freelance writer Joe Resnick contributed to this story.