

## **BASEBALL TOWN, USA**

### **A Close Connection**

#### **To Sag Harbor**

When my beloved Brooklyn Dodgers moved to Los Angeles in 1957, I quit following baseball, except for early Mets games that were good for laughs. But a few weeks ago I experienced a baseball rebirth. I saw my oldest grandson, 13-year old Daniel, hit a home run over the fence during a game in Cooperstown, New York. You know Cooperstown as the home of the Baseball Hall of Fame. It maintains scores of perfect playing fields where every summer thousands of boys from all over the country come to compete. Daniel lives in Chicago and plays for the Hamlin Park Lions which meant that all week I wore a dorky purple T-shirt emblazoned with the team's heraldic badge on the front and its roster on the back. The Lions played against teams from Maryland, Colorado, Wisconsin, Wyoming, California, even Syosset, Long Island.

Cooperstown actually has a close connection to Sag Harbor. In 1785 William Cooper, a Federalist Congressman in the budding American government, purchased land amidst green rolling hills on Otsego Lake in central New York State. Years later, after the land expanded into a town, it was named for him. His son James Fenimore Cooper grew up there, and, as an adult, found his way to Sag Harbor where he and Charles Dering owned the whaleship Union. It's also where he began writing, eventually creating some of America's most famous novels, including *The Pathfinder*, *The Last of the Mohicans* and *The Deerslayer*.

During each week of summer, over 100 teams of 12 and 13-year olds arrive in Cooperstown and are housed and fed in barracks-like dorms. They play three or four games a

day and towards the end of the week compete in a round robin to declare that week's tournament champion. By the end of 13 weeks, over 14,000 boys have come to the baseball mecca. The games are played outside the village in 22 sweet, identical ball parks enclosed by green fences, 200 feet down the right and left field foul lines. Mercifully for parents and relatives, who are the only spectators, the games are limited to six innings and watched over by dedicated coaches and uniformed umpires. We probably led in the cheering department. Grandma and grandpa (me), mother and father, three aunts, an uncle and three cousins followed Daniel's exploits. We all bunked together in an old farmhouse ten miles north of Cooperstown.

The games are a huge undertaking and some 500 support staffers make sure everything runs smoothly, and it does. The mood throughout is friendly and cheerful, a good play by either side gets applauded, in the entire week we witnessed only good sportsmanship by players and parents. In their home towns, the teams are supported by contributions from the families and by fund-raisers and donations from business sponsors. And by the way, Sag Harbor's own Collegiate League baseball games this year in Mashashimuet Park produced mellow evenings. Another grandson, nine-year old Sam, attended a clinic conducted by some of the Whalers and now plans to become a big league shortstop.

It was mellow too in Cooperstown which is on the National Register of Historic Places. Its Main Street is lined with beautiful restored Colonial buildings, most of them offering baseball artifacts and memorabilia -- caps, big league uniforms old and new, mitts, bats, books, and all sorts of baseball ephemera. We walked through the Hall of Fame and reveled in nostalgia at baseball history, artifacts from the past, photo and video exhibits of Jackie Robinson, Mickey Mantle, Babe Ruth and other icons of the game. The Clark family, half owners of the Singer

Sewing Machine Company, founded the museum in 1938, and still supports arts and events in Cooperstown. It's a village of museums -- the Indian Museum, Carriage and Harness Museum, Farmers Museum among others. Glimmerglass Opera Company also brings people to the area.

Some people question the wisdom of such highly organized baseball for youngsters, but seeing the pride and team spirit of the boys, the life lessons they learn from winning and especially from losing, made me a believer, at least in the way the game is conducted in Cooperstown. Some people also consider America's devotion to baseball and other sports as a waste of time. But I think the late writer Wilfred Sheed, who lived many years in Sag Harbor and wrote beautifully about baseball, remarked that sports are a valuable respite from the sandpaper of our daily lives. And from political craziness, we might add.