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Major League Baseball in Grand Rapids?

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Almost 100 years ago, the federal courtroom in Grand Rapids kept baseball fans glued to the newspapers as a high stakes trial took place.

At that time, baseball had a “reserve clause” which bound a player to a team for as long as the team chose to keep him. The player could not play for any other team unless traded or released and was essentially forced to accept whatever salary the team chose to pay for the year . . . or sit the year out in protest. The purported goal of the reserve clause was to keep the wealthiest teams from signing all of the best players.

William “Reindeer Bill” F. Killefer, of Paw Paw, was a star defensive catcher for the Philadelphia Nationals (and making \$3,200 a year) and, despite the reserve clause, signed a new contract with the Chicago Federals. When he changed his mind, the Federals sued in Grand Rapids to force Killefer to play for them. The Federals lost when the court ruled that the reserve clause in Killefer’s old contract with the Nationals gave the Nationals the right to secure his baseball talents. This made Hall of Fame Pitcher, Grover Cleveland Alexander very happy, as Reindeer Bill was his favorite catcher.

The reserve clause was enforced by major league baseball for another 50 years. In 1969, St. Louis Cardinals outfielder Curt Flood challenged the Cardinals’ trade of him to the Philadelphia Phillies. Flood took his case all the way to the Supreme Court, but the Court held that the reserve clause was a legitimate basis for negotiation in collective bargaining between players and owners, and that the historic baseball antitrust exemption was valid for baseball only and not applicable to any other sport. Flood essentially sacrificed his career, only to lose. Emboldened by the loss, the baseball players’ association made its primary goal the removal of the reserve clause from player contracts. A few years later, in 1975, the reserve clause was struck down when an arbitrator ruled that since pitchers Andy Messersmith and Dave McNally had played for a season without a contract, they could become free agents. This ruling essentially dismantled the reserve clause and opened the door to free agency.

Michigan has 37 “Legal Milestones” placed throughout the State. A plaque commemorating the 1914 “reserve clause” decision was originally placed at the Grand Rapids Art Museum in 1986, but moved to Old Kent Park (now Fifth Third Ballpark) in 1996. Next time you attend a Whitecaps game, look for the plaque honoring Grand Rapids’ connection to major league baseball.