Opinion
Culture



Centerfield Gate at Nationals Park in Washington, D.C. (Wikimedia Commons/Famartin)



by Colman McCarthy

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Not everywhere do we have a summer of discontent. Think Washington, of all unlikely places. A hop or two away from the unhallowed halls of Congress, and near the end of South Capitol Street, is the stadium of the Washington Nationals and its hurlers, sluggers and base-stealers.

Before packed bleachers, game after joyous game, the burnished team is well-managed by baseball sage Dusty Baker. It and he not only sizzle with a midseason 62-39 won-lost record matched by few other squads but had four of its players — Max Scherzer, Daniel Murphy, Ryan Zimmerman and Bryce Harper — on the starting lineup at the July All-Star game in Miami.

Washington may be a swamp, plausible because near the White House is the Foggy Bottom neighborhood, but this summer the team romps on a field of dreams where they do come true. Homers are common, whiffs rare.

Baseball books run into the hundreds, thousands some would claim. They include the celebrated: S.L. Price's *Heart of the Game*, Jackie Robinson's *I Never Had It Made* , Jim Bouton's *Ball Four*, and *Clemente* by David Maraniss. And the obscure *Only the Ball Was White: A History of Legendary Black Players and All-Black Professional Teams* by Robert Peterson.

If the depth of research, the lightness of the prose, and the evidence of unrivaled legwork are the measurements of quality, then few books touch all the bases like the 1997 classic *Ballpark Vacations: Great Family Trips to Minor League and Classic Major League Baseball Parks Across America*.

The co-authors are Peggy Engel and Bruce Adams, my longtime friends and whose daughter Emily was in my peace studies class at Bethesda-Chevy Chase High School in Maryland. In an adventurous summer in the mid-1990s, the couple gassed up their Dodge Caravan and took to the nation's interstates and back roads with Emily, then 8, and brother Hugh, 5, happily in tow.

By their count, Peggy and Bruce report that they "had driven 25,000 miles, been in 44 states, seen 85 baseball games in 82 stadiums, gotten 11 foul balls and seen three rainbows." This was a family one with Larry King's bighearted view: "If you have to have an obsession, make it baseball."



A 2015 home game of the Toledo Mud Hens (Wikimedia Commons/David Wilson)

Lore, anecdotes and history spice the pages of *Ballpark Vacations*, as when Peggy and Bruce rolled into Toledo, Ohio, and learned how the hometown nine came to be called the Mud Hens: It's "a bird with short wings and long legs that inhabits swamps and marshes. In 1896, the Toledo baseball team played at Bay View Park and there were plenty of mud hens in the marshland outside the ball park."

For a bit of inside-baseball talk, let it be noted that Olympian Jim Thorpe played for the Hens and in a 1923 game hit three home runs. And this: The team's manager from 1926 to 1931 was Casey Stengel, on his way up to dugout glory with the New York Yankees.

Soon enough in their travels, the family discovered that while three major league teams are named after birds — the Cardinals, Orioles and Blue Jays — it is in the minor leagues where the largest aviary of free-ranging fowl are, among them the

Sioux Falls Canaries, Lancaster JetHawks, Memphis Chicks, Port City Roosters, Phoenix Firebirds, Ogden Raptors, New Haven Ravens, Rio Grande Valley WhiteWings, Fargo-Moorhead RedHawks and Delmarva Shorebirds.

They found canines and felines: the Portland Sea Dogs, Charleston RiverDogs, Hardware City Rock Cats, Michigan Battle Cats, Carolina Mudcats, Lynchburg Hillcats and Charleston Alley Cats. Plus some exotics: Savannah Sand Gnats, Winston-Salem Warthogs and Piedmont Boll Weevils.

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The minor leagues can be the sweatshops of professional baseball: low pay, long-bus-ride boredom, junk food at a McDonald's, and a Motel 6 or Econo Lodge for sleep. But as Wilfrid Sheed wrote in *Baseball and Lesser Sports* of those lucky enough to make it to the minors: "Blessed are those who follow [their dream] all the way. Or even part of the way. A guy who's played one game in the pros is like a former state senator, a big man in most neighborhoods, and any saloon, as long as he lives.

So how did Peggy and Bruce cope with the inevitable "Hey, how long before we get there" whines from the backseat twosome? They report: "A mechanical lifesaver for long trips was the 9-inch combination TV/VCR that a neighbor lent us. It plugs into the cigarette lighter and we lashed it with a bungee cord on top of the driver and passenger armrests. ... The children never watched the TV but the VCR worked miracles in reducing the snipping and complaints during the six-hour drives."

The favorite tapes included "A League of Their Own," "Angels in the Outfield" and "The Pride of the Yankees."

The same miasmic week in late July that vulgarities, firings and unraked muck were sinking the White House to new lows, the Washington Nationals were soaring to new highs: a spree of eight home runs in one game, with the score 15-2.

> Yesterday we unveiled the @AllStarGame logo.
>
> And today we previewed the #HRDerby. pic.twitter.com/FKG750sTES

— Washington Nationals (@Nationals) July 27, 2017

If you come to the nation's capital this summer, and there's still time, skip the White House tour and head for the stadium. Much better for your spirits.

[Colman McCarthy's recent book is *Baseball Forever*.]