

Hoosier 14

Morton J. Marcus
for the
Indianapolis Literary Club
November 21, 2011

Members of the Club: This paper is about saints and faith. Your quiet attention is requested as if you were in a house of worship.

For this is how it was. Not a sentimental time of soft colors, but an era of sharp black and white. Though the world was in color, the magazines, newspapers, and movies were in black and white. The Depression was immortalized in black and white. Good was white and evil black in the westerns and in the newsreels.

When Mickey Owen dropped the third strike on Tommy Hendrich of the Yankees, the world went from white to black. Here we were in game four of the 1941 World Series. The world was at war, but in the United States, at least in New York City, only the Yankees and the Dodgers were at war.

For it was war. It was the Brooklyn Dodgers in the World Series for the first time in 21 years against the ever-successful, despised Yankees. It was the common man versus the elite representatives of powerful, mythical and mystical forces. It was the working man versus Wall Street man.

The Yankees led the Series two games to one, but the Dodgers led game four 4-3 with two outs in the ninth and two strikes on the batter. An arching curve ball from Hugh Casey fooled Hendrich whose bat missed the ball -- the ball that subsequently fooled Brooklyn's catcher. Hendrich went to first and the Yankees went on to win the game. Then they won the fifth game and it was all over.

The Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, the nation mobilized, rationing took over the home front, the Andrew Sisters sang and Brooklyn sank into caricature once more. Radio audiences laughed when Brooklyn was mentioned. William Bendix was type-cast as a good-hearted dullard from Brooklyn.

Back in 1898, five New York counties were consolidated into a single city. Brooklyn was absorbed into the City of New York. Ferries and trollies read "to city" as if Brooklyn was the sticks. A proud city had become a borough of a mega-metropolis. The immigrants and sons of immigrants who moved their families to Brooklyn for the clean country air were suddenly ground down to second-class status. In that year of 1898, the Brooklyn baseball team finished an ignominious tenth in the 12 team National League.

Brooklyn baseball fans between 1890 and 1913 rooted for a team nicknamed variously the Bridegrooms, or the Grooms, the Wonders, the Superbas, the Infants, or the Trolley Dodgers. From 1914 to 1931 they were known as the Robins after Wilbert Robinson, their manager. It was 1932 before the name was fixed as the Dodgers.

Their record over the half century from 1890 to 1940 was mediocre to abysmal -- except for five first place finishes in 1890, 1899, 1900, 1916 and 1920. Three of those five league victories were before the World Series became the annual capstone to a baseball season. In 1916, the Dodgers lost to the Boston Red Sox in five games; in 1920, they lost to the Cleveland Indians in seven games. Worst still, their propensity to lose the National League pennant whenever they managed to escape the second division, earned them the title of Da Bums.

Then in 1939, shortstop Leo Durocher became the Dodgers' playing-manager and the team finished third. The following year Harold (Peevee) Reese took over at short and the team finished second. Both years the Dodgers finished 12 games behind the champion Cincinnati Reds. But the team had formed.

Oh, ye Gods of the Diamond remember them who served you:
Dolph Camilli, Billy Herman, Peevee Reese, Cookie Lavagetto,

Ducky Medwick, Pistol Pete Reiser, Dixie Walker -- and catching -
- Mickey Owen.

The passed ball -- Mickey Owen's eternal error -- the defeat by the cross-town Yankees, to say nothing of the Great Depression and World War II, formed the backdrop for the stage on which a 19 year old school boy from Petersburg, Indiana, entered as a third baseman in 1943.

Gil Hodges would play in only one game for the Dodgers that year. He would walk, steal a base and strike out twice.

The son of Charlie and Irene Hodges, Gilbert Raymond was born in Princeton, Indiana, on April 4, 1924. His father did not want his sons Bob and Bud (as Gil was known) to go into the mines. A way out was sports. Both sons were outstanding high school athletes in Petersburg, but Gil chose to go to St. Joseph College in Rensselaer, Indiana rather than follow his older brother into the minor leagues of baseball.

In that summer of 1943, Gil Hodges (6'1" 200 lbs.) was playing industrial ball near Indianapolis when a scout for the Dodgers spotted him and urged Branch Rickey, the Dodgers' president, to sign him immediately. Gil was given a signing bonus of \$500 after a tryout and brought up to the parent club for that one game.

However, the manpower demands of President Roosevelt in 1944 and '45 took precedence over the enticements of President Rickey. Gil joined the Marines and served on Iwo Jima and Okinawa. He came home after the war to complete his bachelor's degree at Oakland City College and returned to the Dodgers' minor league team in Newport News where he was trained as a catcher.

In 1947, Gil was carried as the Dodgers' third string catcher behind Bruce Edwards and Bobby Bragen. He appeared in only

28 games of the 154 game schedule. The Dodgers won the pennant and lost again to the Yankees in the World Series.

Those were the days when each league had but eight teams and travel was by rail. Since the early part of the century, the alignment of teams had been stable. Boston, Philadelphia, Chicago and St. Louis had two teams each. New York had three. Night baseball was only twelve years old and television was closer than the horizon.

The big change for the Dodgers and America in 1947 was Jackie Robinson. The first Negro to play in the modern big leagues, Robinson was a spectacular addition to the Dodgers' lineup. His speed, power and intelligence were far above average. He played with dignity under the pressure of extensive racial bigotry.

In 1947, the Dodgers had veteran Eddie Stanky at second base so Jackie Robinson played first base. Hodges stayed in the dugout or the bullpen and learned. Next year, and there is always next year in Brooklyn -- the city of perpetual hope, fervid hope, desperate hope -- next year, Gil Hodges would enter the pantheon of baseball greats.

Thus, when Stanky was traded in 1948 to the Boston Braves, Robinson was moved to second where his mobility would be valuable and Hodges was converted into a premiere first baseman.

The Dodgers did not win the pennant in '48. Stanky, Spahn, Sain and the Boston Braves would lose in the World Series to Bob Feller, Bob Lemon, player-manager Lou Boudreau and the Cleveland Indians. But Hodges was a winner in '48. He met and married Joan Lombardi, a girl from the Bay Ridge section of Brooklyn. They bought a house on Bedford Avenue between Avenues M and N. Gil Hodges of Indiana had become a permanent resident of Brooklyn, N.Y.

The Dodgers won the pennant in '49. They lost the pennant in '50 to the Phillies on a Dick Sisler home run at the very end of the season. In '51, cursed be the year, they lost in a three game playoff to Bobby Thompson and the hated cross-town Giants. In 1952, '53, '55 and '56, the Dodgers won the National League pennant. In the ten years from 1947 to 1956, the Dodgers either won the pennant or finished second nine times.

However, only in 1955 did they win the World Series by beating the Yankees. Only then did they exorcise the devil, remove the shame, banish the disgrace, and free Brooklyn from the generations of opprobrium that had given rise to the comedy of Woody Allen.

The names of players on those successful Dodger teams are well-known: Roe, Erskine, Newcombe, Furillo, Snider, Campanella, Reese, and of course Robinson. Players would come and go (Hermanski, Pafko, Cox, Branca, Loes, Labine, Gilliam, Amoros, Koufax and Drysdale).

The team would move to Los Angeles after the '57 season and Brooklyn would lose its focus. A great franchise would still reign in the National League, but it would not be in Brooklyn. Ebbets Field would be torn down to make way for public housing. The Mets would be born, like premature babes, in 1962. They would never be, could never be the Dodgers.

Hodges played through 1961 for the Dodgers. Then, at age 38, he moved over to the foundling team, the Mets, under manager Casey Stengel, who had managed the Dodgers from 1934 to '36 after playing outfield for them each year from 1912 to '17.

Gil Hodges was a quiet person, a powerful man, a streak hitter, and an acknowledged leader. His lifetime batting average was .273, with 370 home runs, the most by a right-handed hitter to that

point in major league history. Reliable, he knocked in more than 100 runs for seven consecutive seasons from 1949 to 1955, Durable, he played in more than 100 games for 14 straight seasons. He was selected to the All-Star team eight times.

His defensive play gave others confidence that their throws to first would be plucked out of the air or scrapped off the ground. Many players commented on his huge "soft" hands.

However, it was as a streak hitter that Hodges drew national attention in the 1952 World Series against the ever-present Yankees. He appeared at the plate 26 times. Gil walked five times and went hitless in 21 at-bats. No one booed.

Gil's support from the fans continued as his slump continued into the next season. In the middle of May '53 he was hitting a pathetic .187 and would be benched by Manager Charlie Dressen for five days.

Then it happened: on one of those humid early summer days, when the breeze does not blow across Brooklyn from the New York Harbor or up from Coney Island, Father Herbert Redmond of St. Xavier Roman Catholic Church told his congregation it was too hot for a sermon. They should "Go home. Keep the commandments and pray for Gil Hodges."

Such was Brooklyn, its players, its fans and its Gods in those days. And the Gods listened.....

Hodges came out of his slump and batted .302 for the year with 31 homers and 122 RBIs. In '54, Hodges was at the peak of his career, batting .304 with 42 home runs and 130 RBIs. In '55, when the full blessings of heaven fell upon Brooklyn, Hodges drove in the Dodgers' only two runs in their decisive 2-1 seventh game World Series victory over the Yankees.

Suddenly, Bedford Avenue, which runs from the Williamsburg Bridge, past Ebbets Field and Brooklyn College to Sheepshead Bay, was truly the boulevard beautiful, the street of dreams, and the avenue of ultimate achievement.

By 1961, Gil Hodges and Duke Snider were the only survivors on the Dodgers' roster from the great teams of the late '40s to mid-'50s. Gil went to the Mets with mixed feelings. The best part of the move was that he would stay in baseball and could be home in Brooklyn with Joan and the children. He played a mere 54 games in '62 and another 11 in '63 before he had necessary surgery on his right knee.

Then, just 40 games into the '63 season, Gil was called to Washington to manage the down-trodden expansion Senators.

Observers had mixed views about the announcement. Some thought Gil was too much of a gentleman to be a manager. He was too quiet, too introverted to command. Others saw him, however, as a charismatic leader who could impress men with reason, experience, and strength of character. He was trained as a catcher and played first base. Hence he was involved in nearly every play as it unfolded. He was a masterful student of the game, anticipating pitches, positioning players on defense.

Nonetheless, it was another dismal era in the history of Washington baseball. The '63 team finished in tenth place again, 42 -79 under Hodges in that partial season. But each year thereafter the team improved until, in 1967, the Senators were merely nine games under .500 and tied for sixth place in a ten team league.

With his strong New York roots, his personal popularity, and his evident capabilities as a leader, Gil was doomed to take over the miserable Mets. Under Stengel and his successor, Wes Westrum,

the Mets finished tenth of ten teams five times in their first six years. Under Hodges in 1968, the Mets again finished tenth.

There followed a meeting of the baseball Gods at the mountain top and it was decreed that 1969 would be like no other season here-to-fore. To ensure the fate of the Mets, the Gods kept Leo Durocher as manager of the Cubs.

From his days in the '30s with the Gas House Gang of the Cardinals in St. Louis, Durocher played and managed as if all opponents and umpires were mortal enemies. He would drive his players to exhaustion in his relentless determination to win. And it did not work.

Banks, Kessinger, Williams, Santo, and Hundley all played in 151 or more games during 1969. The pitching staff, led by Fergie Jenkins, was over-worked and of decreasing effectiveness.

Hodges had a young team of future stars, names now recalled with awe: Nolan Ryan, Tom Seaver, Don Cardwell, Jerry Koosman, Tommy Agee and Cleon Jones. But there were also long time Mets like Ron Swoboda, Ed Kranepool, and Art Shamsky who were consistent with a last place team.

The Cubs were the power of the east. The young Mets chased them all season, yet were 8.5 games behind in mid-August. Then the Mets realized their destiny. They came on to defeat the Cubs and the rest of the division in a momentous drive that swept them into the first intra-league post-season match-up between division leaders. The Atlanta Braves (late of Boston and Milwaukee) went down in three games. Then the Baltimore Orioles (late of St. Louis) yielded in five games and the Miracle Mets were world champions.

Gil Hodges had done what no one could have expected. He brought forth a winner from tenth place to first place in one

season. The team that had been a national curiosity, a subject of ridicule, was transformed into a set of delightful, if quirky, winners.

Hodges continued to manage the Mets, but the miracle could not be repeated. After all, even Moses parted the waters but once. In '70 and '71 the team placed third in their division, but each year a little further behind the leader.

On April 2, 1972, during spring training in Florida, Gil Hodges was finishing a round of golf with a few of his coaches. About 5 p.m. on this hot, humid day, the quiet man suffered a massive heart attack. He died in minutes, two days before his 48th birthday.

He was buried at Holy Cross Cemetery in Brooklyn. In time, a bridge connecting Brooklyn with Rockaway was named after him. His home town of Petersburg also named a bridge over the White River for him on Indiana highway 57. Today a mural honors him on the wall of a downtown Petersburg building.

Although the Mets have retired his number 14 uniform, the Dodgers have not.

Many of his mates from the dynastic Dodgers of the late '40s to the mid-'50s were elected to the Baseball Hall of Fame. Hodges has not. There are many who consider this neglect significant and unfortunate. For election to the Hall demands that candidates "shall be chosen on the basis of playing ability, integrity, sportsmanship, character, their contribution to the team or teams on which they played and to baseball in general."

Certainly, the Hoosier who wore number 14 met all those requirements in full; he hit home runs in all of those categories.