

1948 INDIANS STILL REMEMBERED FIFTY YEARS LATER

By Marc D. Allan

"There comes a time," Ray Kinsella says in the film *Field of Dreams*, quoting author Terence Mann, "when all the cosmic tumblers have clicked into place and the universe opens itself up for a few seconds to show you what's possible."

That might explain the 1948 Indianapolis Indians. That team was Indianapolis baseball's answer to a harmonic convergence - the right players, manager, location and fans coming together for a pennant-winning season that set an Indianapolis attendance record

(494,577) that stood until 1996.

But the Indians have put many championship teams on the field in their first 111 years. What made this one so special that people still talk about it 50 years later?

"The atmosphere on the club was like family," says Tom Saffell, that team's speedy leadoff hitter, who's now 76 and president of the rookie-level Gulf Coast League in Florida. "Everybody was in coordination with everybody else. There was no dissention on the club. Of course, that happens when you're winning."

And win the '48 Indians did, compiling a 100-54 record. The Indians were affiliated with the Pittsburgh Pirates at the time, but the team had the look of a Big Red Machine - lots of hitting, adequate pitching.

They had center-fielder Saffell, second-baseman Jack "the Scat" Cassini

and right-fielder Ted Beard batting 1-2-3 and combining for 68 stolen bases and 351 runs scored. The clean-up hitter, Leslie "Moe" Fleming, had seven years of major-league experience and plenty of power. He hit 26 homers, drove in 143 runs and batted .323.

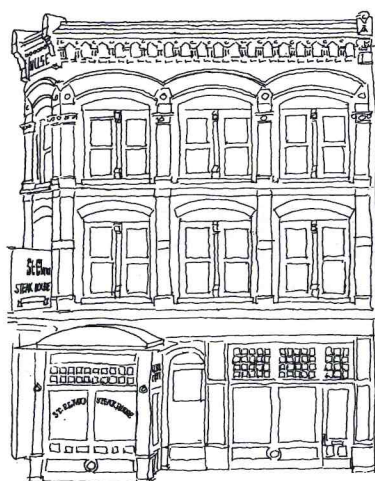
After them in manager Al Lopez's everyday lineup were left-fielder Culley Rikard (107 runs batted in), shortstop Pete Castiglione (.308 average, 88 rbis), Don Gutteridge or Russ Peters at third base (a combined 99 rbis), catcher Earl Turner (.313 average) and the pitcher. The pitching staff included 21-game winner Bob Malloy and Jim Bagby and Chet Johnson, who each won 16.

And leading this crew was Lopez, managing for the first time after an 18-year career as a major-league catcher.

"In all my years of managing, I think I did the best job of managing my first



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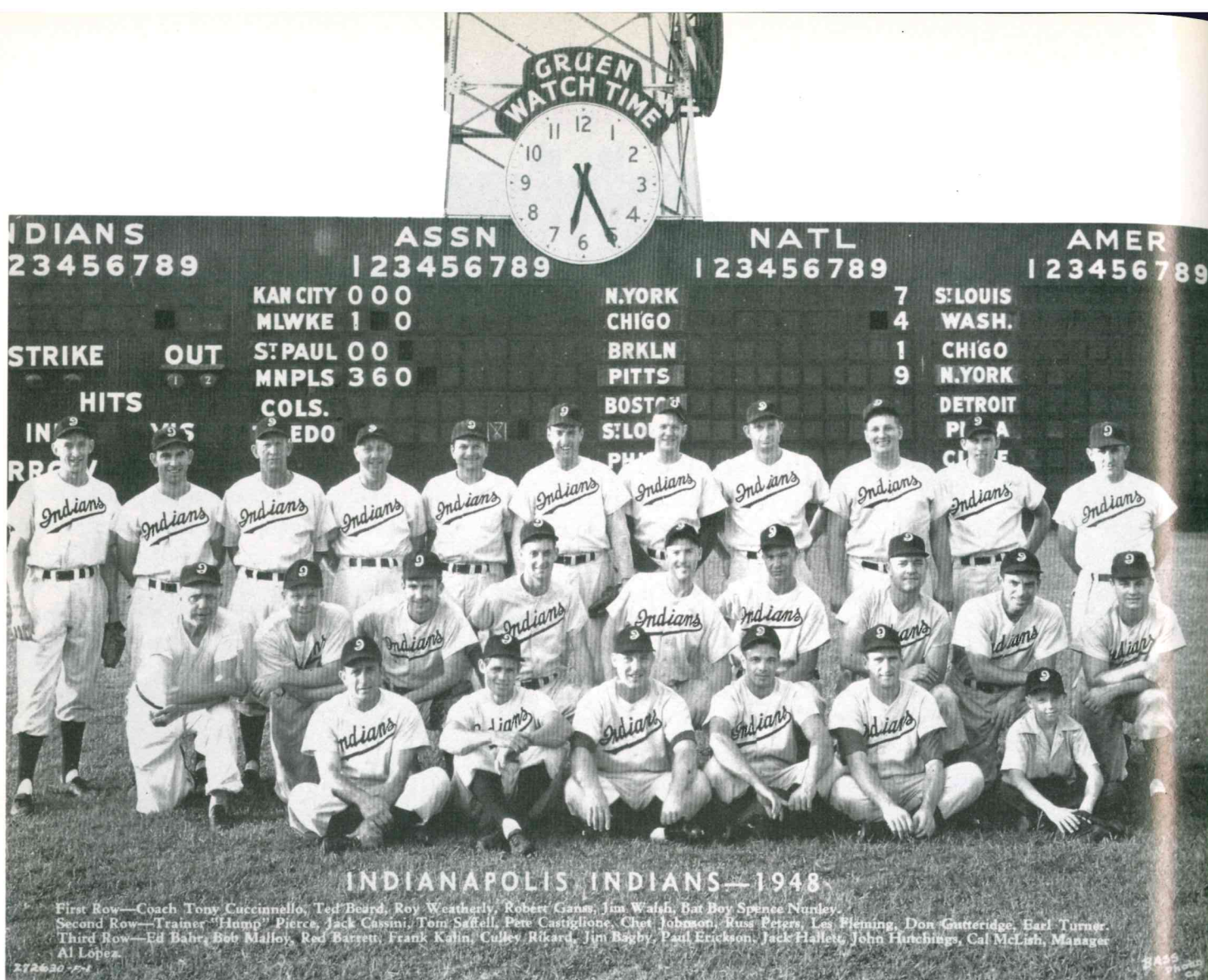
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year in Indianapolis," Lopez, who turns 90 in August, says by phone from his home in Florida. "I didn't know whether I could do it or not. It was a challenge."

In spring training, Lopez spent his days trying to evaluate 65-70 players the Pirates organization sent him while getting himself into shape. Lopez would play in 43 games that year for Indianapolis, in addition to managing.

The Indians won 17 of 20 games that spring, an indication of what would happen when they headed north to Victory Field. But the team couldn't have foretold how it would be greeted - by a city hungry for baseball.

This was right after World War II, so the best players had returned from military service. And unlike today, people had a limited number of enter-

tainment options.

"Television hadn't become so all-important yet," says Max Schumacher, now well-known as the Indians' long-time president but then a 15-year-old baseball fan. "You didn't have air-conditioned homes. So here was an exciting team, the first team to contend for the pennant in 20 years, managed by a charismatic manager. Your house is warm and you're not into television, so you drive out to Victory Field and watch the Indians play."

"They had good crowds every day," says No. 3 hitter Beard, 77, who still lives here, in Fishers. "And it made you feel like playing ball with all those people in the stands."

Talk to people today about the '48 Indians and they don't remember specific games from that season. Not the

season-opening 6-2 win over the Kansas City Blues, the 4-1 pennant-clinching win over the Columbus Red Birds or anything in between. (Of course, it was 50 years ago.)

But they remember the electricity.

Norm Beplay, the Indians' public-address announcer for 40-something years, recalls the excitement that team generated. He marvels at the combination of speed, hitting and power that could overcome sometimes-spotty pitching. He recalls when Beard threw out one baserunner three times in the same game.

Schumacher remembers the excitement in the packed stands ("I can remember my father dropping me off, then finding a place to park the car") caused by everything from the daring baserunning to the antics of 300-pound

relief pitcher Johnny Hutchings, who later managed the Indians.

"One time he stumbled coming over to field a bunt at the third-base line," Schumacher says. "He knew he had blown the play, so instead of just laying on the ground like most people do, he just began rolling over - over the foul line and toward the Indians dug-out a little ways. The crowd went wild."

Lopez remembers how the team ran off with the pennant. "We won 100 games and we were out front pretty good, so there wasn't that tight a race," he says.

And the players remember Lopez. Today, when players routinely criticize (and even choke) managers and coaches, hearing the '48 Indians talk about Lopez is nothing less than heartening.

"Probably the greatest manager I ever played for," Saffell says. "Talking to him was just like talking to your dad. If he had something to say to you, he'd be up front with you and let you know how he felt."

"Al Lopez," adds Beard, "was the best manager who ever walked on a baseball field. He had personality. He knew the players. He knew the game exceptionally well."

Incredibly, as great a team as the 1948 Indians were, its players didn't get much of a chance in the major leagues. Most returned to Indianapolis for the 1949 season.

"You had just 16 teams and tremendous competition for those few jobs that would come available in the major leagues," Schumacher says.

Saffell got called up to the majors in 1949. He played portions of three-plus years in Pittsburgh and part of a season with the Kansas City Athletics.

"Mr. (Branch) Rickey was the general manager up there (in Pittsburgh)," Saffell says. "They had us going up and down. We kept the railroads going between Indianapolis and Pittsburgh."

Cassini appeared in eight games with the 1949 Pirates. He never batted. Fleming played his last season of major-league ball in 1949. He got into 20

games with Pittsburgh.

As for Beard, he got called up to the majors at the end of '48 season. (He missed the championship series, which the Indians lost to St. Paul, 4 games to 2.)

Beard would travel between the majors and minors for seven years - five with Pittsburgh, two with the Chicago White Sox. In one memorable game in 1950 against the Boston Braves, Beard lined to second base in his first at-bat and lined to right field his second time up. But in his third at-bat, with the cosmic tumblers completely in alignment, Beard hit the ball completely out of Forbes Field. That made him one of four men to accomplish that feat. The others? Babe Ruth, Willie Stargell and Mickey Mantle, who blasted his homer in an exhibition game.

Ruth hit 714 career homers, Stargell 475, Mantle 536. Ted Beard, 5-foot-8, 165 pounds, hit six home runs in his major-league career.

Marc Allan is a feature writer for the Indianapolis Star-News.

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