

# From New Orleans To Cooperstown

*Former New Orleans Pelicans in Baseball's Hall of Fame*

by

S. Derby Gisclair

Like many baseball fans, I was intrigued by the character of Archie "Moonlight" Graham in the 1989 film *Field of Dreams*. That he was a real-life person from Chisholm, Minnesota made his story even more interesting. I always found it difficult to imagine a professional career that consisted of a single at-bat, a single game, a single season.

Yet there have been thousands of Moonlight Grahams in baseball's long and colorful history.

They came from the rural counties of North Carolina, Ohio, and Tennessee. They came from towns like Russell Gulch (CO), Paw Paw (MI), and Wewoka (OK). They also came from cities like Brooklyn, Chicago, and St. Louis, as well as from Canada, Mexico and Switzerland.

Along the way their travels brought them to New Orleans as a member of the city's AA baseball club --- the New Orleans Pelicans. For some it was a short step on their way to *the show*. For others their time in the Crescent City came at the end of their careers.

Over 1,100 men donned a Pelican uniform between 1887 through 1959 when the Pelicans played in the Southern League and its successor, the Southern Association. Most of them have been long forgotten: Urban Williams, Vic Polite, Delton Dunnack, and Joe Stelmack. Others went on to become part of baseball history.

Probably the most famous Pelican was a young man from Pickens County, South Carolina by the name of Joseph Jefferson Jackson – aka *Shoeless Joe Jackson*. He played 136 games for the 1910 club, batting .354 to lead the Pelicans to their second Southern Association pennant. Shoeless Joe would go on to play for the Cleveland Indians and the Chicago White Sox. He would become famous as a member of the 1919 Chicago *Black Sox* accused of throwing the World Series against a Cincinnati team considered to be far inferior. He and seven of his other teammates were banned from baseball for life by newly appointed commissioner Judge Kennesaw Mountain Landis. Whether or not you believe he was involved, baseball lost one of its greatest players.

The Pelicans can boast four alumnae who did go on to the Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, three as players and one as a manager.

## DAZZY VANCE



Although he didn't play his first full season until age 31, Arthur "Dazzy" Vance was the dominant National League strikeout pitcher of the 1920s. After a decade in the minors, Vance was well on his way to burning out his arm. Despite great starts his arm would tire by mid-season. Pelican manager Johnny Dobbs allowed Vance to start on four days rest instead of the usual three days. He went 21 – 11 in 1921 and was bought by the Dodgers. Actually, it was manager Dobbs who convinced the Dodgers to take Vance. Dodger scout Larry Sutton was originally interested in Vance's batterymate, catcher Hank DeBerry.

Starting every fifth day for the Dodgers over the next 11 seasons, Vance used his blazing fastball to win 187 games for the Dodgers – leading them everywhere but to a pennant. In one of baseball's often repeated unusual plays, Vance was one of the three Dodger runners to wind up on third base at the same time when Babe Herman "tripled" into a double play (it was actually scored a double). Vance, starting from second base, ran much more cautiously than the runners behind him expected, returning to third base after rounding the bag.

In 1924, Vance topped the league with a 2.16 ERA and career highs of 28 wins, 262 strikeouts, and 30 complete games. He had only six losses. The Dodgers fell one win short of the first-place Giants, the closest Vance ever came to a pennant in Brooklyn. He was named MVP in 1924 (over the great Rogers Hornsby) and pitched a no-hitter against Philadelphia the next year. He led the league in wins twice and ERA three times and is the only pitcher to top the National League in strikeouts seven consecutive seasons.

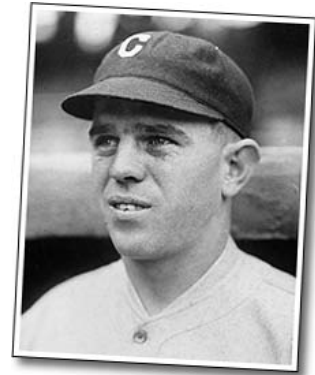
His unique pitching motion was not only effective, but intimidating as well. A 6'2" 200-pound fireballer, Vance would rock back and kick his leg high, waggle his foot and then hurl the ball toward the hitter. His habit of wearing a tattered red undershirt to disguise his pitching motion was later outlawed.

In 1933, after going 12-11 at age forty-one, he was traded to the St. Louis Cardinals, joining the Dean brothers, Dizzy and Paul. The following year saw Vance in Cincinnati, but he returned to St. Louis in time to earn a World Series ring. He finished his career as a reliever in Brooklyn in 1935.

During his career, Vance tied for the NL lead in shutouts four times, compiling a total of 30. He struck out 2,045 batters and walked only 840. He was elected to the Hall of Fame in 1955 by the Baseball Writers Association, receiving 205 votes of 251 ballots cast (81.67%).

## JOE SEWELL

Without question the toughest batter in baseball history to strike out, Joe Sewell was a consistent .300 hitter during 14 seasons with the Cleveland Indians and the New York Yankees. Yet it was a tragic accident that brought Sewell to the majors from New Orleans.



On August 16, 1920 Cleveland second baseman Ray Chapman was hit in the temple by a pitch thrown by Yankee submariner Carl Mays. He died twelve hours later. When Chapman's replacement, Harry Lunte, was hurt on Labor Day, Cleveland summoned Sewell from the New Orleans Pelicans to play shortstop. Far from being overwhelmed by the assignment (Sewell was batting .289 in 92 games with New Orleans) the rookie batted .329 down the stretch to lead the Indians to their first pennant.

Sewell's career rate of one strikeout every 63 at bats is by far the best in history, and his 3 strikeouts in 1932 are the fewest ever for a full season. His record of just 114 strikeouts in 7,132 games may never be equaled. Sewell had three full seasons (1925, 1929 and 1933), in which he struck out just four times.

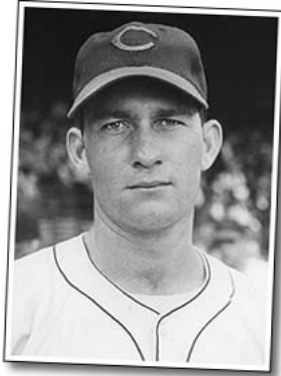
But *Little Joe* (5'7") was more than a contact hitter. He led the Indians in RBIs three times, led American League shortstops in outs and assists four times, and in fielding percentage twice. From September 13, 1922 until April 30, 1930, he played in 1,103 straight games – a major league record at that time, later broken by Lou Gehrig.

Released after the 1930 season, Sewell filled a trouble spot at third for the Yankees for three seasons before retiring and spent two more years with the Yankees as a coach. He later scouted for the Indians and coached at the University of Alabama, leading the school to a Southeastern Conference title in 1968.

He was elected to the Hall of Fame in 1977 by the Veterans Committee.

## BOB LEMON

Lemon spent the 1939 season with the New Orleans Pelicans, with 27 games as an outfielder and 21 games at third base. His .309 batting average earning him a trip to Cleveland, but in two trials as a third baseman before the war he failed to stick with the Indians because of his mediocre hitting. He showed a strong arm in the field, but his throws had a natural sinking effect. Upon his return to Cleveland after three years in the Navy, he turned to pitching at age twenty-six. Eight years



after making his professional debut as an infielder-outfielder, Bob Lemon realized his destiny as a pitcher.

Although plagued by wildness, Lemon overcame his rookie jitters, showing enough promise in his first season on the mound (2.49 ERA in 94 innings) to keep him on the roster. He went on to become one of the most successful right-handers of the post-WWII period, embarking on a major league pitching career that would include seven 20-win seasons over a nine-year span. In 1947 he was 11-5 and became the Indians' second most effective starter behind Hall of Famer Bob Feller. The right-handed ace

became a key factor in Cleveland's 1948 and 1954 pennant drives, posting records of 20-14 and 23-7, respectively.

Lemon's money pitch was his sinking fastball. He led the AL in strikeouts with 170 in 1950, but he was most effective when opposing batters were beating the ball into the dirt. Always slightly wild, his season bases on balls and strikeout marks were usually similar, as were his career bases totals of 1,251 walks and 1,277 strikeouts.

Lemon was considered to be one of the best-hitting pitchers of his time and was often used as a pinch hitter, totaling 31 hits in 109 pinch-hit appearances (.284). His 37 home runs lifetime is just one behind Wes Ferrell's record for pitchers, and his 7 HR in 1949 ties him for second on the pitchers' season list.

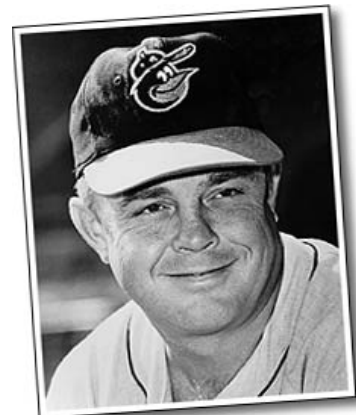
After his playing days, Lemon became a successful manager, first in the Pacific Coast League with the Seattle Angels (1964), then in the majors with the Kansas City Royals (1970 – 72) , the Chicago White Sox (1977), and the New York Yankees (1978 – 79, 1981 – 82). He would lead the Yankees to the World Championship in 1978 over the Dodgers.

He was elected to the Hall of Fame in 1976.

## **EARL WEAVER**

Another former Pelican player elected to the Hall of Fame was Earl Weaver, second baseman on the 1955 and 1956 Pelican clubs under manager Andy Cohen. He never made it to the majors as a player, but he did make it as a manager.

Weaver toiled in the Cardinal and Pirate organizations from 1948 through 1957 when he became a manager in the Orioles system. He managed in the minors until he



was brought in to replace O's skipper Hank Bauer midway through 1968. During his tenure his clubs won six American League East titles, four American League pennants (1969, 1970, 1971 and 1979) and took the World Series in 1970. He ranks as one of the most successful managers in baseball history with 1,480 career wins – a .583 winning percentage. His five 100-win seasons rank second only to Joe McCarthy.

Always looking for an edge, Weaver pioneered the use of radar guns in professional baseball during 1972 spring training in Miami, Florida, to track the speed of pitches.

He was elected to the Hall of Fame in 1996 by the Veterans Committee. Weaver was inducted as a manager in recognition of his stormy, yet successful stewardship of the Baltimore Orioles from 1968 to 1982 and again in 1985 and 1986.

Over the years the New Orleans Pelicans produced numerous players who would go on to be named league MVP or to the All-Star teams in the American League and the National League. And whether they played in only a single game or walked the road to Cooperstown, these men provided generations of New Orleanians with the best they had. And that's all we ever asked.

## ***Pelican Briefs***

### Player Statistics With New Orleans Pelicans

#### **DAZZY VANCE (P)**

<b>Year</b>	<b>W</b>	<b>L</b>	<b>PCT</b>	<b>G</b>	<b>IP</b>	<b>H</b>	<b>BB</b>	<b>SO</b>	<b>ERA</b>	<b>TEAM</b>
1917	6	8	.429	16	122	102	28	61	1.98	N.O.
1918	8	6	.571	15	117	93	33	40		Memphis
1920	16	17	.485	45	284	253	65	65		Memphis – N.O.
1921	21	11	.656	38	253	225	80	163	3.52	N.O.

#### **JOE SEWELL (SS)**

<b>Year</b>	<b>GP</b>	<b>AB</b>	<b>R</b>	<b>H</b>	<b>RBI</b>	<b>2B</b>	<b>3B</b>	<b>HR</b>	<b>BB</b>	<b>SO</b>	<b>SB</b>	<b>BA</b>
1920	92	346	58	100		19	8	2			7	.289

#### **BOB LEMON (OF, 3B)**

<b>Year</b>	<b>GP</b>	<b>AB</b>	<b>R</b>	<b>H</b>	<b>RBI</b>	<b>2B</b>	<b>3B</b>	<b>HR</b>	<b>BB</b>	<b>SO</b>	<b>SB</b>	<b>BA</b>
1939	52	207	30	64	22	9	6	0	12	23	1	.309

#### **EARL WEAVER (2B)**

<b>Year</b>	<b>GP</b>	<b>AB</b>	<b>R</b>	<b>H</b>	<b>RBI</b>	<b>2B</b>	<b>3B</b>	<b>HR</b>	<b>BB</b>	<b>SO</b>	<b>SB</b>	<b>BA</b>
1955	119	392	77	109	69	19	2	6	80	38	1	.278
1956	26	101	11	23	8	4	0	0	16	14	0	.228