

"Only the Finest New York Ash"

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE BASEBALL BAT

by Raymond Schuessler

Baseball bats were always a precious commodity in our neighborhood. Who can ever forget that grim admonition during batting practice: "Keep the label up,"—a maneuver that supposedly prevented breakage. But hands and memories were small in those days and one often heard the sickening splinter of wood and the dire excommunication: "Your Old Man is gonna pay for this!" But anyone's "Old Man" seldom had a spare nickel in those days.

Often we had two or three bats at the ball field, but most of them were heavy-laden with studs, screws, glue, black electrical tape and holy water. The one shiny new bat in the bunch was often a cooperative affair, purchased through joint contribution of four or five players whose parents were lucky enough to have a job.

These co-owners were the only ones allowed to use the new bat, but we did so with trepidation and only a faint swing, for whoever was unlucky enough to break this priceless scepter was sure to be chased home with the broken pieces and the incantation of every newly learned adjective.

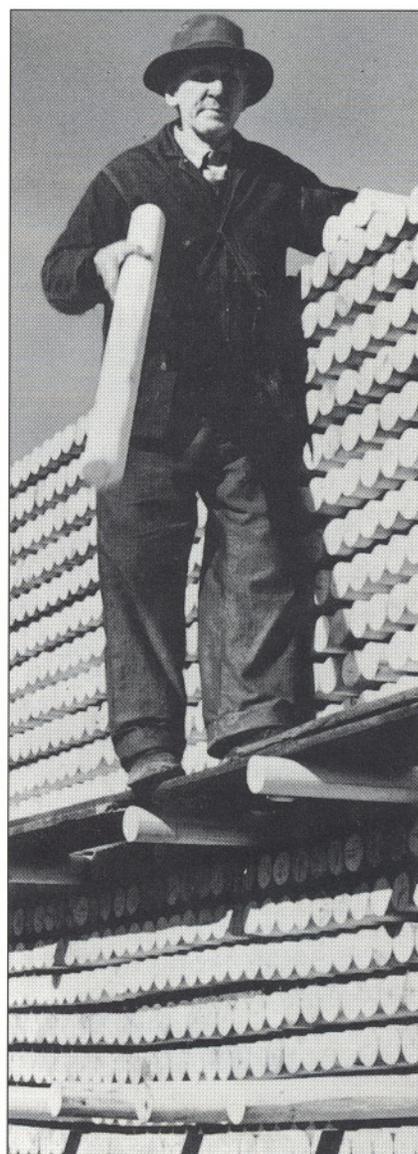
Back in the old days professional ball players used to make their own bats, season their own wood, and carve out their own crude models. One ingenious soul, H. A. Hillerich, began turning out bats for a few sandlotters on his father's lathe. News of the lathe-turned bats spread and finally reached the ears of Pete Browning, the Babe Ruth of his day. One day Browning, on a hitting streak, broke his bat. Saddened, he went to the Hillerich wood shop and far into the night he and the turner worked over the lathe. Browning was a stickler for the correct model, insisting on a little off here and a little off there.

Next day, Browning made five straight hits and exclaimed, "Now there's a real bat I can slug 'em with."

Pete Browning, incidentally, was the only player who christened every one of his bats, and who devoutly believed that each bat held just so many hits. When a bat's hit quota was reached he would retire it to his basement home where he hung it on a line. At one time he had over 200 bats hanging there, every one of them blessed with a name of its own. When he ran out of popular names he turned to the Scriptures for monikers such as Aaron, Moses, King Solomon, Ezekiel, etc.

Most early clubs didn't own too many bats. The most they might carry was seven or eight. A bat was costly in those days. A favorite piece of wood was the handle of an old pitchfork, hayfork or other castoff piece of wood that could be cut to size. They favored hickory because it was thought to have great resilience. But by 1890 ash took the place of all other woods in bat making. Today 95 percent of the bats are made from ash.

Workman with billets of ash wood at a Louisville, Kentucky, lumber yard, ca. 1948. Photo from the Forest History Society archives.



Ballplayers often went to the factories to watch their bats being made, at least the old timers did, picking them out of the production lines, or selecting the wood they were to be made from.

The player most meticulous about his bats was Ted Williams, the perfectionist. He used to tell the turner just how he wanted his bat shaped. One year he sent back his supply, saying they didn't taper enough at the grip. "We swore they were the same until we measured," said a turner. "And sure enough Williams was right: they were off 5/1000 of an inch."

Most players have idiosyncrasies. Eddie Collins had to have his bat made from half heartwood and half sapwood. Hugh Duffy, an old timer who hit .438 one season, had all the billets tested by bouncing them on a concrete floor and using only those with a certain ring. Babe Ruth always insisted that his bats have plenty of knots in the hitting end. Actually, they were not knots at all, but darkened spots where the tree bent in the wind. But the superstitious Babe was sure they were the secret of his success and so the turners had to hunt through a special woodpile for his clubs.

Ruth, who introduced the new style of bat, the long, cowtailing model, used four different models during his long career. His first warclub weighed 52 ounces, but when he concluded his career with the Boston Braves by hitting three home runs in his last game, he was swinging a 38-ounce bat.

Bats have become smaller and lighter through the years. From a stiff heavy piece of lumber, the bat has been shaped into a slim whippy-type wand of terrible flexibility. The display of bats at the Baseball Hall of Fame at Cooperstown, New York, has many varieties. Can you imagine hitting .400 with the tiny 30-inch model once swung by Wee Willie Keeler who became famous for "hitting them were they ain't"? The Honus Wagner model looks like something carved out of a pioneer's fence post. The oddest bat of all belonged to Heinie

Groh, Giants third baseman. This was a bottle bat that resembled a rolling pin.

The first signature to be used on a bat was that of Honus Wagner back in 1905. Not only was this the first signature to be used on bats, but the idea of using such a device was brand new at the time, and was the forerunner of the present widespread endorsement advertising.

Bats are indeed a precious product, even these days, in that they require such a definite and particular type of ash wood. At the Hall of Fame are enshrined the game's most famous bats. And just to the north, in the Adirondacks, are the forests generally recognized as producing the best bats.

Baseball bats are made from northern white ash, preferably second-growth timber, which is ideal for clouting a baseball far and wide. It is a hard, tough wood, combining light weight with a powerful whip action; hard enough to bite into the horsehide and springy enough to snap the ball away like a slingshot.

But just being ash wood is not enough to make a baseball bat. It must be grown under specific conditions to ensure the right grain, weight, and moisture content. This occurs only in the relatively limited forest belt in the lower Adirondack, Catskill, and southern tier of New York and northern Pennsylvania.

This area reportedly also has special qualities such as the proper soil ingredients and a climate neither too warm nor too rugged. And these are only a few of the requirements.

"The best batwood," say the experts, "grows steadily and evenly for 40 or 50 years to maturity, on the sides of mountains, sheltered from wind and weather. Even the position on the mountainside is important. Seedlings high on the mountain are apt to mature too slowly, and slow growth develops tight-grained wood, too heavy and too rigid, lacking the 'give' which adds zip to a drive. On the other hand, trees grown at too low an elevation develop too rapidly, with a resulting coarse grain."

Throughout this long process, Mother Nature holds the fate of Big League weapons constantly in her hands. Succeeding summers and winters must be fairly uniform and free from extremes. Should a long severe winter be followed by a short summer, growth that year would be stunted and a narrow band of new growth would result. Reversal of these conditions would create a wide grain beyond the thin one, resulting in a bat lacking uniformity.

The best logs for baseball bats are 12 to 15 inches in diameter. From one tree ordinarily enough billets can be obtained to fashion 60 bats. Altogether at least 4,000,000 bats a year are made from New York hardwood. If such large-scale production seems unwarranted, it should be remembered that baseball is a "hitter's" game today. The modern bat is made thinner with great whip, and as a result is more apt to crack.

It is possible to make a bat that would be almost unbreakable but it would lack balance and whip and what the player wants is base hits no matter what the cost.

Could inside curve balls deplete the forests of available bat timber? Fortunately for the future of the game, white ash quickly reseeds itself and the industry responsible for supplying the resource practices sustained-yield forestry to ensure a continual supply of ash for baseball bats into the next century and beyond. ▲

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