



## The View from Right Field

*by Rick Ohler*

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**“2018 (Observed)”**

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“So, I reat chu in de paper, very enchoyable, but I wander, wad iss dis Right Field bissniss?” she asked in delightful, Dutch-accented, flawless English.

“Well,” I said, “it’s a reference to the baseball position. You know something about baseball, right?”

“No, nudding at all,” she said.

“Ah. Of course, not much baseball in the Netherlands. How about cricket?” I asked, hopefully.

“Sorry. Neffer played.”

On a cocktail napkin I set about finger drawing the basics of a baseball diamond, the positions of pitcher and catcher, the infield, the outfield positions—left field, center field and right field. “Usually,” I said, “at least in kids’ baseball, the fewest balls are hit to right field. So the coach will send his least capable (a euphemism for ‘worst’) player to right field where he can do the least damage. Often, there isn’t much to do out there and the right fielder can...”

“I get it. So, you are the observer.”

She had it exactly right. Right fielders, during my days in the Sam Koch League at Foss Field (now Community Pool) in the 1950s and early ‘60s, could often get through a whole game without fielding—and therefore, without flubbing—a ball, and that was fine with me. But I watched intently from my post beyond first base and I became a student of baseball, a lover of baseball, even if I was never very good at it. And standing out there, hoping nobody would hit the ball to me, taught me a lot. As the late, great 20<sup>th</sup> century philosopher Yogi Berra said, “You can observe a

lot just by watching,” to which a corollary was later added, “You can hear a lot by listening.”

Today, I look at baseball as the benchmark, the game other sports wish they could be. When this column began back in 2005 as a sports column, I was pressed to come up with a name for it as the first deadline approached. Writers’ block set in; I couldn’t think of anything. But I recalled my early days in baseball and decided upon “The View From Right Field.” It was original and catchy, and maybe it would get people to ask, “So wad iss dis Right Field?” Little did I suspect that ten years down the line, the words “right” and “left,” used even in the most innocent context, would become a call to political battle. In retrospect, I might better have called the column, “The View From Center Field.”

Anyway, I thank my Dutch reader for giving me not only a reason to remember the true meaning of Right Field, but an idea for this Merry Christmas, Happy Holidays, and Happy New Year column.

I had ample chance to “observe by watching” and “hear by listening,” this year, my first as a more involved writer for the world’s best hometown newspaper. In past years, I’ve written a column every other week, a few baseball and football stories and the occasional feature. This year, as I made a clumsy, failed attempt at semi-retirement, I found another gear in my writing transmission and wrote somewhere in the neighborhood of 160 stories for the *Advertiser*, *The Elma Review* and various other publications that emanate (RIP Snake) from 710 Main Street.

Who would think that in a town of 13,000 souls (maybe twenty-some thousand in the Elma, Marilla, Wales, Aurora greater metropolitan area) there would be so much to observe and hear, so much to learn from those who call this place home? Well, not only did I find plenty of people who work so hard to make this community work, but I have a backlog of observing and hearing that will keep me busy in 2019.

This writing gig I have may look glamorous to the general public, but really it’s an opportunity to sit in a 36-square-mile, three-dimensional classroom and learn about our little world and to try to learn how it connects to that bigger world beyond the 14052. So, before we move on to 2019, here’s a smattering of what I observed and heard in 2018.

In January I had the honor of writing about 93-year-old lifelong East Auroran Clayton Bailey, son of an original Roycrofter, veteran, printer, press operator (SG Press), typewriter impresario, pilot, storyteller and keeper of more first-hand East Aurora history than anyone else in the solar system. And I had the privilege of writing about my friend Nancy Fickenscher, the Queen of Griggs Place, on the sad occasion of her passing.

In February, I reported on Wallenwein’s Best Fish Fry in America (okay, Western New York) award. And I learned about Lothlorien Therapeutic Riding Center’s

connection to the Wounded Warrior Project that helps wounded veterans reconnect with the world they left to serve overseas. Katie Macre and Maggie Keller continue to make Lothlorien a haven for children and adults who can benefit from equine activities. In March, the local chapter of the Vietnam Veterans made a significant gift to Lothlorien, one of several gifts they make each years.

In April I spotlighted (and poked a little fun at) two local characters, Joe Meyer and Steve Sokolski, who toil in different fields, farm fields for Joe, infield and outfield for Steve.

May brought the bicentennial celebration for Aurora, Wales and Holland, news of the ongoing celebrations of the Underground Railroad at Griffins Mills Presbyterian Church, the most active little church in our area, and a very moving and poignant ceremony on Memorial Day at the Oakwood Cemetery.

In June the American Legion Post 362 turned 90 years old, the Kiwanis Chicken Barbecue turned 63, the Fish & Game Club taught kids to fish and Music Fest turned six with the biggest crowd ever.

July ushered in the 4<sup>th</sup> of July parade with Clayt Bailey and fire chief Roger LeBlanc as marshalls, the bicentennial beard contest, the beginning of the Backyard Bash music series behind Vidler's and the townie madness of Reunion Weekend with the RAAP at the Rink, Sidewalk Sale and high school reunions.

With August came the Tour des Parques, a history-oriented, six-mile bicycle trip around the village, tales from John Hamms's 8000-mile motorcycle trip from EA to L.A. along Route 66, and a two-mile creek walk to the last Crookstock Music Fest.

In September, we welcomed the new athletic stadium at the high school with football, boys and girls soccer and field hockey games. The Borderland Music Festival gave us great music and showed us that environmental sustainability is possible, even in a party atmosphere. The Abner Doubleday golf tournament raised over \$20,000 for the Boys and Girls Club.

Tom Pafk's handcrafted benches heralded the opening of the Western New York Land Conservancy's Owens Falls Sanctuary on Center Street in October and in November East Aurora and Korean War veteran Milt Ketterer received a much-belated welcome home when he and his daughter took the Honor Flight to Washington. In November we remembered all our veterans, especially Eric Jednat, Iroquois High School '66, who was killed in Vietnam. Dave Nojaim and Tom and Pat Durham were named winners of the 2018 Stott Award at Roycroft. Oh, and the world's best hometown newspaper was picketed by some protesters and survived to publish the following week. And the week after that.

Santa came to the Roycroft in December, Jim Rozanski was the Aktion Club Member of the Month, the Boys and Girls Club of EA remodeled and introduced new

programming, and I could go on, but I'm already over my word limit. Not bad for a small town, eh? See you 2019.