A new name for the Hall of Fame

F. C. Lane

Jack Kavanagh

SABRites are forever advancing the cause of overlooked ball players, insisting on their worthiness of election to the Baseball Hall of Fame and enshrinement in Cooperstown. Strange that a Society whose members are historians and devotees of the written word are so restrained in helping the Hall of Fame bestow the honor of the J. G. Taylor Spink Award. It was a fine idea in 1962 to begin honoring those whose prose and journalism round out the total picture of baseball and elevate it above simple statistics. What the early inductees who followed the inaugural choice, Spink himself, shared was a national identity. Ring Lardner, Hugh Fullerton, Jr., Grantland Rice, Red Smith, et al, had nationally known bylines. Spink himself, although not a significant writer, was the editor of the once enormously important The Sporting News. In later years the annual accolade has gone to writers, however worthy, who have or had regional readerships. In the process, an overlooked giant from the past has been bypassed: F. C. Lane, for twenty-seven years the editor of Baseball Magazine.

Ferdinand Cole Lane was far more than an ink-stained wretch plying an editor’s trade from a Manhattan office at 70 Fifth Avenue. He was an erudite, educated man whose life in baseball was not the only noteworthy accomplishment he left behind when he died in his ninety-ninth year. The Sporting News and, before it expired, The Sporting Life, had kept a weekly eye on baseball. TSN provided boxscores and game notes, primarily. Lane, when he accepted appointment to edit Baseball Magazine, realized that a monthly could not compete for explicit coverage with a weekly. He focused on feature stories, mainly describing the off-field lives of players. For this insightful trait, historians and biographers are thankful.

F. C. Lane visited famous ballplayers at their homes during the off-season, writing detailed accounts of what they did away from the ballfield. As a result, we have far richer knowledge of Honus Wagner, Walter Johnson, Grover Cleveland Alexander, and others than what we learn from memoirs and reminiscences written after their starring careers had ended. Lane would be invited to spend several days and would come away with family anecdotes and history. Visiting Coffeyville, Kansas, he learned Walter Johnson’s father had once played town ball back in Ohio. A short train ride away in St. Paul, Nebraska, Lane met Grover Cleveland Alexander’s father and learned what political zeal had suggested naming one of a brood of thirteen for a U. S. president. Lane, at home in any company, hunkered down with Honus Wagner and his hunting dogs and went into the fields with Alexander and Johnson.

His articles are richly illustrated with gravure photos, taken during visits or borrowed from family albums. A rich trove of retrievable art work, it is within the capacity of the photo section of the Baseball Hall of Fame to copy them.

The adaptable F. C. Lane was born on a wheat farm in Minnesota, on October 25, 1885. The fourth child of Alpheus Ferdinand Lane, he toddled along as the family traversed a route back toward the east. After stops in Akron and Canton, Ohio, and a brief look around
Lowell, Massachusetts, the Lanes settled in Truro on Cape Cod before moving to Marion.

Lane completed his secondary education at Tabor Academy and received a BA from Boston University in 1907. The future writer of baseball news had no known connection with the sport. As a graduate student he worked as an assistant biologist for Boston University and the Massachusetts Commission of Fisheries and Game. Visiting the Mediterranean and countries along its shores stretched his undergraduate time at Boston University to seven years. He spent six months in London, arriving with nineteen cents and scrambling to raise the fare to come home.

Troublesome lungs sequestered F. C. Lane for a while in a log cabin in Alberta, Canada before he returned to Boston and began writing for *Baseball Magazine*. He soon was named editor and moved to New York. Ensnared in the security of his new position, Lane crossed the bridge to Brooklyn and married Emma in 1914. He was a prolific writer, turning out hundreds of articles mostly analyzing baseball’s structure, its players, events, and trends. He was also a ghostwriter for inarticulate celebrities, and he produced an overlooked classic, *Batting*, in 1925. It contains batting tips and observations by hundreds of early twentieth century hitters and was sold through *Baseball Magazine*.

Lane regarded Cape Cod as his home base and he returned there in the late 1930s, leaving behind volumes of work printed on now-crumbling paper. Happily for SABR researchers, *Baseball Magazine* has been transferred to microfiche and is available from the library at the Baseball Hall of Fame. Credit for preserving these fragile works belongs to Mark Rucker, head of Transcendental Graphics, and Tom Heitz, former director of the National Baseball Library at the Hall of Fame.

Leaving baseball behind him, Lane was only in mid-career. From 1941 to 1943, he was chairman of the history department at Piedmont College in Demorest, Georgia. (Yes, trivia buffs, home of John Mize.) He established a journalism program at the college and was awarded an honorary Doctor of Humanities degree.

Lane succumbed to the wanderlust that had first struck during his college years, and became a travel writer. He circled the globe seven times with stops at both the north and south poles. Not limited to prose, Lane also published poetry. He concluded an autobiographical sketch, written in his late sixties, by saying, “My more recent writings have been largely devoted to some thirty odd articles for encyclopedias and a series of books on global geography. I have been happily married for thirty-eight years and my wife shares my many interests. Although I am losing the argument with Father Time, as the years pass too swiftly, I still find life a continuous adventure, more interesting than any of its accomplishments.” Father Time granted F.C. and his wife Emma three decades more, however; time to follow a few more books with a quarter century of retirement on their beloved Cape Cod. Lane died on June 30, 1984, followed ten months later by his life’s companion.

A graceful writer, an erudite man, F. C. Lane was more than a contributor to the written world of baseball’s past. He was an adornment. There are no more Lardners, Rices, and Red Smiffs whose wide readership deserves recognition at the Hall of Fame. Already a great many artifacts donated by the Lanes are within the walls of the Baseball Museum and Hall of Fame in Cooperstown. It is high time his name was included in the writer’s wing. Fittingly, it is located in the newly rebuilt library where his considerable contributions, the editing and writing of perceptive pieces for *Baseball Magazine* are contained.

Notes:
More personal information is known from an interview when Lane was 96 and which appeared in the Cape Cod Standard Times, written by Craig Little.

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**A Tough Doubleheader**

*New York sports editors whose job it was to evaluate news stories had a stickler thrown at them on June 3, 1932, when these two stories broke within moments of one another:*

1. In New York, Giant manager John McGraw announced his retirement after three decades.
2. In Philadelphia, Lou Gehrig hit four home runs in one game, only the fourth player to do so.
Which one’s the lead if you run the sports section?

—Jim Murphy

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**A Review of Baseball History** 59