

# Field of Dreams

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**After graduating from college, Jim Nitz spent the next 20 years working in his family's hardware store. But what he really wanted to do was write the story of Milwaukee's forgotten ball park.**

Story by Larry Widen

Very few of the thousands of people that pass beneath I-43's Burleigh Street bridge each day realize they're traveling on hallowed ground for a second or two. Before the north-south freeway was built in 1963, Borchert Field, Milwaukee most beloved ballpark, occupied the land at 7<sup>th</sup> and Chambers Streets. It was here that an aging Babe Ruth thrilled fans with a mighty swat to the power alley. It was here that Casey Stengel managed the Milwaukee Chicks and Lou Gehrig prowled first base just as he did when he was the Yankees' "Iron Horse."



"To a baseball fan, there's no doubt that the area where Borchert Field existed is special," says local historian Jim Nitz. "Although in reality the actual land that The Babe and Gehrig walked on is now part of the landfill at Jones Island." However Nitz is quick to point out that the houses overlooking the freeway between Chambers and Burleigh are the same houses that once had spectacular views of the ballpark. "People used to gather by the hundreds on those porches and roofs to watch the games," Nitz says.

Borchert Field opened on Sunday, May 20<sup>th</sup>, 1888 under the name Athletic Park. The \$40,000 playing field boasted wooden grandstand and bleacher seating as well as 32 luxury boxes. In addition there was an area adjacent to the bleachers for standing-room ticketholders. On opening day, 10,000 people poured through the park entrance at 8<sup>th</sup> and Chambers to see the hometown "Milwaukees" take on the team from St. Paul.

"After graduating from college in 1983, I became a manager in our family's hardware store," Nitz says. "Around that time I heard some great stories about the old ballpark from my wife's aunt who lived across the street." Nitz was hooked and began to delve into the old newspapers and city records to learn more. "Like most amateur historians, it sort of crept up on me," he says. "I didn't really notice the amount of new material I was finding, and I certainly had no idea I'd be publishing any of it."