

#6: Webb Corporation Smashes It Out of the Park

The date was April 17, 1953, and while the facts are often challenged, many feel this was one of, if not, the longest home runs in the history of the game. What makes it even more interesting, New York Yankee slugger, Mickey Mantle at Washington Griffin Stadium, hit it. A monster shot of 565 feet.

I know, what the heck does any of this have to do with Del Webb? Lots. We know in 1928 he struck out in his quest to reach the major leagues, walking away from the game for good. We know he took the passion he had as a baseball player and applied it to becoming a successful businessman. We know throughout the late 20's and virtually all of the 30's, he struggled to make payroll and stay afloat. We know when Mickey hit that home run; Del was his "boss," well sort of.

This is where the "rest of the story" becomes so compelling. The 1940's and 1950's was a time when Del Webb smashed it out of the park; and in more ways than are imaginable. The war years were explosive and Del secured government contracts at levels most companies would love to be on the receiving end of.

His relationships with politicians of all stripes were exceptional. He had a natural gift of meeting people and becoming instant friends. Couple that with a sterling work history of on time and on budget and one quickly comes to understand why he was awarded the number of contracts he got. He was just that good.



Del Webb pictured with Mickey Mantle

Pictured together are two of the true legends of their time. Mickey Mantle was one of the all-time greats and Del Webb was a man among men. Seems only fitting they teamed up in the 50's as the New York Yankees became the most dominant team in baseball history.

Del's success in Arizona attracted the federal government to turn to him as Germany increased its aggressive March through Europe. In 1940, he did two undetermined jobs for the US Army Quartermaster Corps in Cochise County. That led to a contract to rebuild the aging Fort Huachuca in 1942. They started small with ten buildings, but added an additional thirty-six and by the following year broke ground for a USO recreation hall and Red Cross office.

With the air wars in Europe becoming more prevalent, Senator Carl Hayden convinced the Air Force to locate air bases in Arizona. Del built six of them, two major bases being Luke and Williams, along with three training fields and an air naval station. They not only served American pilots but also Chinese and RAF aviators from Britain.

During this time, the Webb Corporation still did their commercial jobs. By then Bob Johnson had opened an office in California that was always busy. In March of 1942, the federal government commissioned Del to build the Japanese relocation camps. Called the Theater of Operations at Parker AZ, it was rumored they were constructing one building an hour. Webb sent 5,000 workmen there to get the job done.

It was a boom time for construction companies during the four years of World War II. When the war ended, rather than shrink into a smaller version of itself, Webb looked at it wholly different. He understood returning troops would need jobs and homes and he was in the perfect position to become the go-to company for much of that work.

This is where the story really begins to unfold in an unbelievable way. In 1945, Del Webb along with Dan Topping and Larry MacPhail purchased the New York Yankees for 2.8 million dollars. They bought out MacPhail in 1947 and the two of them owned the team till 1964 when they sold it to CBS for 14 million dollars. During that time, they would win ten World Series and fourteen American league pennants. Unprecedented in sports history.

In 1946, mobster Benjamin "Bugsy" Siegel's contractor bailed on him while building the Flamingo Hotel and Casino in Las Vegas, Nevada. He contacted Webb and asked him to finish the job. Del reluctantly agreed and stated he was exceptional in that he paid on time and in cash. Webb told Bugsy he was nervous working for him and Siegel replied, "don't worry, we only kill each other." Months later, Bugsy was murdered at his girlfriend's place.

In 1948, the Webb Corporation built Pueblo Gardens in Tucson AZ. It consisted of 600 homes and a shopping center. In 1951, he built the Sahara Hotel and Casino in Las Vegas, which was the precursor to the companies move into the gambling business. And in 1953, he went in on a joint venture in San Manuel, Arizona. It was owned by the Magma Copper Company and the development included building streets, homes, schools, shopping centers, hospitals and parks. Sound familiar?



Originally opening as Litchfield Airport and Phoenix Military Airport, the sprawling air base quickly changed its name to Luke Field. Frank Luke was killed in battle when his plane was shot down and he fought off the German's rather than become a prisoner. The Webb Corporation built the base and added to the complex several times.

The oddity here is, we've barely scratched the surface on the projects Webb was involved in. He did extensive work for Howard Hughes and his massive Hughes Aircraft Company. Even in Hughes reclusive days, they remained in close contact. Across the country, the Webb Corporation was building hospitals, shopping centers, government projects and commercial housing properties.

It's easy to understand the next step for Del Webb and Company to expand and take on a project unlike any other. Nope, didn't happen overnight, but that's the story for next week. For now, let's just conclude this episode with a premise no one can dispute: During the 40's and 50's, Del Webb hit one monster of a home run; literally a grand slam for the ages.

Hope to see you all then.

Bill Pearson