

Club Sent 3'7 Eddie Gaedel to Plate 70 Years Ago: Midget Pinch-Hitter Is Still Part Of St. Louis Browns Lore

by Tom Emery
August 22 2021 9:26 PM



ST. LOUIS - Throughout their colorful history, the St. Louis Browns pulled plenty of stunts. Few were remembered like the pinch-hitting midget.

Thursday (Aug. 19) was the 70th anniversary of the appearance of Eddie Gaedel, a 3'7" midget who personifies the wacky existence of the Browns franchise. But while the thought of a midget baseball player brings smiles even today, the story of Eddie Gaedel is one of showmanship, combined with heartbreak and loneliness.

Gaedel's sole appearance in a major league game on Aug. 19, 1951 remains an iconic moment in both the history of the Browns and baseball on the whole. His autograph now brings a higher price among collectors than Babe Ruth.

Today, St. Louis claims to have the best fans in baseball, a self-styled Cardinal Nation. In decades past, St. Louis had a different slogan – “first in shoes, first in booze, and last in the American League.”

In their 52 years in St. Louis, the Browns finished first once, second twice, and sixth or worse 33 times. By comparison, the Cardinals played in the World Series nine times between 1926-46, and never finished lower than second between 1941-49. The Browns' sole World Series appearance came in 1944 – when they lost to the Cardinals in six games.

However, the Browns had one major advantage over the Cardinals. Since the early 1920s, the Browns had actually been the Cardinals' landlords as the owners of Sportsman's Park, in the north part of the city.

Though the Cardinals ranked higher than fourth in the eight-team National League in attendance only four times between 1923-50, they routinely outdrew the Browns, whose gate was usually among the worst in the majors. In 1935, the Browns drew 80,922 fans *for the entire season*, and the Great Depression was not entirely to blame.

The Browns moved after the 1953 season to become the Baltimore Orioles, who have often refused to recognize the franchise's earlier existence in St. Louis. Twelve years before the final exit, the Browns had planned to move to Los Angeles, but a scheduled vote did not take place on Dec. 8, 1941 – mainly because of Pearl Harbor, the day before.

Still, many of the players preferred playing for the Browns than the other team in town. In an interview for a 2000 book by Peter Golenbock, Don Gutteridge, a former Cardinal who was the Browns' second baseman through their 1940s heyday, said that “the Cardinals were always pinching pennies. The Browns were a better club to play for than the Cardinals.”

By the early 1950s, both franchises were flirting with moves elsewhere, but the Browns were in particularly bad shape. The franchise, though, hoped to turn things around with the flamboyant Bill Veeck, who bought the Browns in 1951 from an ownership tandem including Bill DeWitt, whose son is a current Cardinals' team owner.

Veeck challenged the Cardinals head on with a series of wacky promotions. On Aug. 25, 1951, the Browns hosted “Grandstand Manager’s Night,” in which fans were allowed to make on-field decisions. Manager Zack Taylor held up signs such as “Should the Browns Bunt?,” “Take Out the Pitcher?,” and “Steal?,” while spectators held signs replying “Yes” or “No.”

The Browns knocked off the Philadelphia Athletics 5-3 that night, a highlight for a squad that went 52-102. Six days earlier, Veeck had pulled off a stunt that made Grandstand Manager’s Night seem mundane.

Edward Carl Gaedel was born in Chicago on June 8, 1925, the second of three children in a family of normal physical attributes. At age three, his parents realized that his growth was abnormally small, for an undetermined medical reason. He would only grow to three feet, seven inches and 65 pounds.

Not surprisingly, Gaedel was bullied as a youth, which led to plenty of tears and more than a few fistfights. Still, he managed to complete high school and worked a string of jobs, including as a paperboy, in circuses and rodeos, and other novelty positions.

During World War II, he was a riveter inside fighter planes because, as a relative said “he could get into a tiny little space that a normal person wouldn’t.”

Using his height to his benefit, he was a member of the American Guild of Variety Artists, and found more work in entertainment. In 1946, Mercury Records hired Gaedel as their “Mercury Man,” the company’s famous logo, for which he wore a winged hat.

As Gaedel found a way to get by, Veeck was planning his next big promotion, as usual. How he came up with the idea of a midget baseball player is unclear. Some credit a fictional story by James Thurber in the *Saturday Evening Post* a decade earlier, while others cite John McGraw, the longtime manager of the New York Giants and one of the winningest skippers in baseball history. Taylor, the Browns manager, had played for McGraw, is said to have told Veeck about McGraw’s idea to have a little person bat, if the team needed a walk.

Never one to shy away from shock factor, Veeck contacted a Cleveland talent agent, and was given Gaedel’s name. Some researchers believe that Veeck went through several other midgets before settling on Gaedel, but the reason is clear – Veeck loved the idea of sending a midget to the plate.

And he wanted to keep it secret. He dispatched the Browns' traveling secretary, Bill Durney, to Chicago to drive Gaedel back to the Chase Hotel in St. Louis, where the midget was cloaked in blankets to hide his identity as he got to his room. Veeck waited until the last minute on that Saturday night to call the St. Louis papers, to ensure a photographer would be sent. He made no mention of a midget.

Gaedel's contract called for payment on the minimum-wage for a midget act, which was \$15,400 – or \$100 for the day. Veeck also took out a million-dollar life insurance policy, to protect against a catastrophic accident. Gaedel's game appearance was scheduled on a Sunday, meaning that his contract would not be reviewed by American League President Will Harridge until at least Monday. Knowing this, Veeck had filed the contract with the league office as late on Friday as possible.

Veeck worked with Gaedel to create a batting stance, ordering him to squat as much as possible. Veeck later claimed to have measured Gaedel's strike zone at one and a half inches. Whether that was the actual size of the zone is debatable.

Of course, someone of Gaedel's small size needed a specially-fitted uniform. As a result, Veeck borrowed a Browns uniform belonging to nine-year-old Bill DeWitt, Jr., the current Cardinals' co-owner. DeWitt's uniform had the number 6 on it, which was removed and replaced with the number under which Gaedel was listed in the program – 1/8.



Though Gaedel's arrival was shrouded in secrecy, there was plenty of activity on the docket for the fans on Aug. 19, 1951. The Browns, who entered the day at 36-77, were scheduled to play a doubleheader against Detroit, and the 50th anniversary of both the American League and Falstaff Beer, a major sponsor, was to be celebrated.

The 18,369 fans were given a slice of cake, a box of ice cream, and a small can of beer as they entered Sportsman's Park. It was the largest Browns home crowd since the previous September 17. Legendary baseball entertainer Max Patkin was on hand, as if the occasion needed any further hijinks. In the scorecard was a new player – "1/8, Gaedel," which was overlooked by most in attendance.

In a 2015 article, Bill Christine, who was at the game, wrote that a friend noticed Gaedel's listing in the scorecard. Christine recalled that he replied, "must be a printing mistake."

St. Louis dropped the opener 5-2. Between games, a seven-foot paper mache birthday cake was to be wheeled onto the field. Gaedel was actually scheduled to pop out of the cake, dressed in a Browns uniform and elf shoes, as the first surprise of the day.

But as the big moment approached, he lost his nerve. At that point, the story of Eddie Gaedel and the Browns takes a darker turn.

The cheering crowd unnerved Gaedel, who pleaded with Durney to let him go. Durney, who weighed around 250, informed the midget (as related by Golenbock) that "there are 18,000 people in this park and there's one I know I can lick. You dead or alive, you're going in there."

Gaedel begged that the elf shoes hurt his feet, but Durney lifted him up, dropped him into the cake, and covered the top with tissue paper. The cake was pushed out onto the field, and the public-address announcer welcomed "a brand-new Brownie." Gaedel popped out of the cake and ran on the field, to the shock of the crowd, who responded with tepid applause.

Upstairs, the Falstaff executives grouched that Veeck's promotion was a letdown. Veeck, of course, knew the big event was coming, and was unfazed.

Meanwhile, Gaedel was dressed for the game in the Cardinals clubhouse, which was empty; when either the Browns or Cardinals were at home, the other was invariably on the road. Taylor, the manager, sat Gaedel on his lap to tie his shoelaces.

Longtime St. Louis sportswriter Bob Broeg, as quoted by Golenbock, said that as Taylor worked, he told Gaedel that “I don’t think they will throw at you.”

This again frightened Gaedel, who ran for the door, only to be intercepted by Durney. The secretary then recited one of Veeck’s earlier threats, though there are variations in the story.

Broeg reported that Veeck had told the midget that “I was an expert rifleman in the Marines, and I have a rifle up . When you get in that ballgame today, if you swing that bat, I’ll shoot you dead.”

Veeck confirmed the story years later, writing “I told him that I would be on the roof of the ballpark with a high-powered rifle, and if he swung at any pitches, I would shoot him.”

According to Broeg, Durney stopped Gaedel’s escape at the door with a similar threat, claiming that “you know what Veeck told you. That man is on the roof. He will shoot you dead.” Patkin recalled that “the poor kid was scared to death” as he stepped up to bat, though other accounts dispute that claim.



For the second game on Sunday, Taylor penciled in the leadoff man as Frank Saucier, who had just made his major-league debut on July 21.

Saucier was listed in right field, which he saw as odd. In 1991, Saucier recalled that he “thought it was strange, because I only played left field.” Saucier made one putout in the top of the first and was heading for the plate for his at-bat in the bottom of the frame when Taylor called him back.

And so became the moment that Saucier is best remembered for – a bittersweet twist in the Eddie Gaedel episode. A native of Leslie, Mo., 60 miles southwest of St. Louis, Saucier spent much of his youth in the lovely Missouri River town of Washington, then attended Westminster College in Fulton, Mo.

The Westminster baseball field is now named for Saucier, one of many deserved honors in his life. He had volunteered for the Navy in World War II and witnessed some of the mass destruction that had leveled Hiroshima after the first atomic bomb.

Saucier had been a star at nearly every level of the minors, batting .357 in 39 games for the Belleville franchise of the Class D Illinois State League (a forerunner of the Midwest League) in 1948.

In 1949, he captured the batting title of the Class B Big State League with a sizzling .446 average, with 74 RBI in 96 games, for Wichita Falls. There, he met his future wife, Virginia, a union that lasted until her death in 2009. He then won another batting crown in the Class AA Texas League in 1950, reeling off a .343 average for San Antonio.

His minor-league stardom earned Saucier a stint with the Browns, which lasted just over two months. His final big-league appearance was on September 23. Saucier had one hit in fourteen career at-bats, with one RBI, in eighteen games.

As the glow from Gaedel's appearance continued, Saucier was called back to active duty, and served stateside during the Korean War. After his service, he settled in Texas, enjoyed a productive career in oil and gas, and raised a fine family. Today at 95, he is one of five surviving players who ever wore a Browns uniform.

During his long life, Frank Saucier has excelled in baseball, the military, and in life in general. It seems unfortunate that he is only known today as the man who was lifted from a game in favor of a midget.

Some accounts state that he holds no grudges, heaping praise during interviews on Veeck, the Browns, and his big-league experience in general. Christine, however, asserts that Saucier was "furious, as batboy Fred Buchholz would relate years later... family and friends were in the stands. He threw his bat, sore that he had been replaced by a midget."

Christine added that Saucier had declined numerous interviews to appear at functions of the St. Louis Browns Historical Society, founded in 1984 to honor the long-lost franchise.

In the 2001 ESPN interview, Saucier recalled that “I sat down on the bench, and I noticed that there was a midget there. Of course, I didn’t know his name at the time.” That Saucier seemed so nonchalant about the situation is a testament to the circus atmosphere that surrounded Veeck’s Browns.

The Tigers starter was lefthander Bob Cain, who won 37 games in a five-year career. He was in his lone season in Detroit, and, ironically, would spend the 1952 and 1953 seasons with the Browns. Behind the plate was catcher Bob Swift, the normal backup, who was in the 12th of 14 years in the major leagues. As the P.A. man announced Gaedel as the pinch-hitter, the reaction was immediate.

“We were laughing so hard nobody could say anything,” said Joe Ginsberg, the usual Detroit catcher, in 2001. “I mean, you can’t – you can’t believe it. There’s a tiny little guy, just taking little baby steps up to the plate.”

One who did not share the amusement was Detroit manager Red Rolfe, who exploded in anger. Another was home plate umpire Ed Hurley, who screamed “what the hell” at Taylor.

Interviewed for Golenbock’s book, Taylor said “I played it nice and calm” and asked of Hurley, “what do you mean? We just signed up a new player and here is the contract.” Taylor then reached in his back pocket for a copy.

After reviewing the contract, a perplexed Hurley gave the call to play on. Cain and Swift, though, had no idea how to proceed. Cain wanted to pitch underhanded, a suggestion rejected by Swift, who later said “I was going to catch lying down with one hand propped under my chin, but I decided the whole thing had gone far enough.”

As a result, Swift dropped to both knees as the tiny Gaedel went into his batting crouch. Facing virtually no strike zone, Cain walked Gaedel on four high pitches. Christine remembers that Cain was laughing throughout the exchange.

Now reveling in the moment, Gaedel stopped twice on his way down to first to bow to the crowd. He was then lifted for a pinch-runner, Jim Delsing, whom Gaedel jocularly slapped on the backside as he jogged for the dugout.

Detroit won the game 6-2 as Saucier watched. He recalled that he said to Eddie, “you kind of hammed it up going down to first base, didn’t you?” Still on a high, Gaedel exclaimed, “man, I felt like Babe Ruth.” No one had any idea that Gaedel’s signature would later cost more than the Sultan of Swat.

In the league office in Chicago, Harridge was infuriated at Veeck's bravado, and disqualified Gaedel from any future appearances. He also ruled that all player contracts must be approved in advance.

Further, Harridge banned Gaedel's name from the record book. In turn, Veeck then persuaded Gaedel to deliver a speech blaming Harridge for wrecking his career. Whether or not it was tongue-in-cheek is debatable. Later in the 1950s, Gaedel reportedly wrote that Harridge was a "little bastard" who "ruined my career."

The Browns owner also insisted that Phil Rizzuto, the Yankees' diminutive star shortstop, be investigated as either a short ballplayer or a tall dwarf. The next spring, seven midgets asked for tryouts at the Browns' spring training camp; all were turned away.

Gaedel's at-bat was eventually reinstated to the official records, but by then, his fame was flickering out. After his stunt in St. Louis, Gaedel made the rounds on television, appearing on the Ed Sullivan and Bing Crosby shows and earning a total of \$17,000. He also appeared at promotions nationwide, including at various ballparks.

On September 6, he made a paid appearance at an amateur baseball game in Sycamore, Ill., taking two quick strikes before arguing with the umpire. On the 0-2 count, he swung at strike three, yelling at the ump as he left.

Three days earlier, however, Gaedel was in the headlines for the wrong reasons. An Associated Press wire reported that Gaedel had been arrested at 3:30 a.m. in Cincinnati for berating police officers who had mistaken him for a child.

The cops had yelled, "hey little boy, you're out kinda late," and reported that Gaedel "let loose with the biggest line of profanity we ever heard from one person." A North Carolina newspaper ran the piece under the headline, "Midget Cuts Loose with Some Tall Cussing." Gaedel was charged with disorderly conduct, and released on a \$25 bond.

Golenbock writes that Gaedel was drunk, which was probably the case. Relatives later spoke of Gaedel's love of alcohol, which caused plenty of fights. A niece recalled in 2001 that "somebody wanted to take a pop at the little guy, and they often did." It became part of the story of Eddie Gaedel that is lost amid the hoopla of his pinch-hit appearance in St. Louis.

As he receded to the background, Gaedel worked for Buster Brown shoes and as a circus act, including for Ringling Brothers. He also had a job for a time at Chicago's

famous Midget Club, a bar owned by a former Munchkin from *The Wizard of Oz* and his wife, also a dwarf entertainer, on the South Side. Gaedel reportedly turned down more lucrative offers of employment because he didn't like travel.

During his service in the 1950s, Saucier was stationed in Pensacola, where the Ringling Brothers circus, with Gaedel, just happened to be playing one night. Saucier tracked down Gaedel, and as he recalled in 1991, "I asked him how he was getting along."

"It ain't baseball" was Gaedel's reply.

By the Browns' final season in St. Louis in 1953, Veeck had alienated the other American League owners, who basically forced him to sell. He spent six years in bitter exile before resurfacing in Chicago, buying controlling interest in the White Sox in 1959.

Gaedel was still living in Chicago, and not surprisingly, Veeck looked him up for another wacky promotion. Before a Sox home game on May 26, 1959, Comiskey Park fans were treated to the arrival of a helicopter in the outfield, which unloaded Gaedel and three other midgets, dressed as spacemen, to deliver "ray guns" to second baseman Nellie Fox and shortstop Luis Aparicio, two of the club's shortest players.

Two hours away that same night, the Milwaukee Braves broke up a perfect game by Pittsburgh's Harvey Haddix in the 13th inning. The feat jockeyed with photos of Veeck's spaceman stunt for column space the next morning.

A couple of years later, Veeck received complaints from Sox fans about vendors impeding their view. Once again, he reached for the phone and called Eddie Gaedel.

For the home opener on April 19, 1961, Veeck enlisted Gaedel and seven other midgets to work as vendors, selling peanuts and soda in front of the box seats.

But Gaedel, who was chronically unemployed, was in declining health. He suffered from high blood pressure and frequent falls, issues that were exacerbated by his drinking, which often kept him out all night.

Veeck later said that "it got to be that the only time Eddie was happy was when he was bombed. When he got a few drinks in him, he thought he was six-foot-nine."

On the night of June 18, 1961, Gaedel went out to a bowling alley and, predictably, got drunk. What happened on the way home is unclear. The next morning, his mother found him dead in his bed, with severe bruises on his knees and the left side of his face. Relatives recalled that his clothes were stained with blood.

Various sources place the location of the fight on either the sidewalk toward home, or in the doorway of his apartment building. An inquest found that he had suffered a heart attack, likely caused by the altercation. He was buried at Saint Mary Catholic Cemetery and Mausoleum in Evergreen Park, south of Chicago. Gaedel was 10 days past his 36th birthday.

News of Gaedel's death was printed in papers across the nation. But the only figure from organized baseball who attended his funeral was Bob Cain, the Detroit pitcher who walked him at Sportsman's Park, a decade before.

Broeg was quoted in Golenbock's book as asking Cain why he attended the funeral. Cain, a professional speaker and sales representative for Kraft Foods, replied, "I'm kind of a religious guy, but to tell you the truth, I was a goodwill speaker, and guess what my best story was all these years?"

Gaedel has since become a sort of cult figure among baseball junkies. In 2009, a documentary on Major League Baseball Network recapped his story, and clubs to his memory are found today in Spokane, Los Angeles, Dublin, and Elburn, Ill., near Chicago.

Also in Elburn is the Eddie Gaedel Pub and Grill is decorated with memorabilia relating to its namesake. Gaedel had appeared at an exhibition baseball game in Elburn shortly after his shining moment with the Browns. He had been scheduled to be the grand marshal at a local parade, but was late in arriving.

One Browns fanatic has even written a song in Gaedel's honor, and his game bat sold for \$44,000 a few years ago. It added to the legend of Eddie Gaedel, the little player with a long legacy, a story of smiles and tears.

Tom Emery is a freelance writer and historical researcher from Carlinville, Ill. He may be reached at 217-710-8392 or ilcivilwar@yahoo.com.