



MY FAVORITE TOY? APBA BASEBALL.(FRONT)(THE TALK)(Column)

~~TheCapitalTimes~~ **The Capital Times** May 11, 2006 Byline: Doug Moe

IN OCTOBER, the Wisconsin Historical Museum on the Capitol Square will unveil an exhibit called "Toy Stories," which will display and interpret dozens of popular toys and games from the 1940s on.

As part of advance work for the exhibit, the museum has asked some well-known Wisconsin residents to share stories of which toys or games meant a lot to them as kids, and why.

Once the exhibit opens, the curators hope those stories will inspire visitors to record their own stories of favorite toys and games for the museum's Web site.

It seems like a fine idea, and maybe the museum folks were inspired by a favorite son of Wisconsin, Orson Welles, whose movie masterpiece, "Citizen Kane," hangs on a word uttered by newspaper baron Charles Foster Kane on his death bed.

"Rosebud," Kane (Welles) whispers.

That happens in the beginning of the film, and as "Citizen Kane" unfolds the meaning of Kane's last word is investigated and debated.

It turns out to be the name of the sled he had as a boy, symbolic of his innocent childhood.

In a note last week, the Wisconsin Historical Museum asked if I would share a story about a favorite toy or game.

I thought immediately of Welles, and Kane, and Rosebud. What would I whisper on my deathbed?

The answer was easy. It would be something like this:

"If I don't get some better relief pitching, I'm done."

Or: "If you have Gale Sayers, who needs a quarterback?"

I trust to some people, those statements would be as cryptic as "Rosebud."

But not to a species of American male who grew up in the 1960s, whose parents sent to the East Coast for one of two of the greatest mail order sports games in history.

The companies making the games were called APBA (pronounced ap-ba), based in Pennsylvania, and Strat-O-Matic, based in Long Island, N.Y.

I had the APBA baseball game and the Strat-O-Matic football game. They were both great. I spent hours -- days, weeks, months, finally years -- playing them.

I suppose that the youth of today, raised on the pyrotechnics of PlayStation and its competitors, would yawn at a game that was little more than cards and dice. To us it was bliss. There was a science to it. The games used actual players and actual teams, with a player's ability changing each year based on his statistics from the year before. You could play an entire season, keeping statistics, and compare it to what had actually happened in that earlier year.

As I say, I loved both Strat-O-Matic and APBA, but if I could have chosen only one, it would have been APBA baseball. It was the first game I got, and I remember my parents wincing a bit at the \$10 charge. Still, they bought me a revised set of player cards each new season, until I quit playing. I'd race to the mailbox when the new season's cards were due. Why I quit I can't remember. Girls or golf, I suspect.

I am happy to say then company is still around. On Wednesday I spoke by phone with Veryl Lincoln in Lancaster, Pa., where he has worked for APBA since 1965.

"That's about when I started playing!" I said. "Man, I loved it."

Lincoln chuckled. He has heard those rapturous memories before.

In 2002 a Pennsylvania newspaper, the York Sunday News, had an article about APBA baseball that began like this: "It was more than just an ordinary board game. It altered people's lives."

But that article ran under an ominous headline: "Baseball board game struggling: After 51 years, Lancaster-based APBA struggling for financial survival."

On Wednesday, Lincoln acknowledged the tough times, but said APBA is making a comeback. "The situation is a lot better than it had been," Lincoln said.

In the end, the new season was saved. APBA went back to basics -- though sales are now more through the Internet than mail order -- and the company is, subsequently, back on pretty solid footing. Lincoln said they've had success recently offering team card sets from old seasons -- 1961, 1958 -- and they're planning a set of the best teams from a variety of seasons.

I'm still grinning thinking about all those hours down in my parents' den, wonderfully lost in the world of APBA baseball. Now I realize that, like Kane, I will have only one word on my deathbed:

"APBA."

And someone will say: "Was he that crazy about Swedish pop-rock?"

Heard something Moe should know? Call 252-6446, write PO Box 8060, Madison, WI 53708, or e-mail dmoe@madison.com.

CAPTION(S):

APBA CO.

APBA baseball was "a game that was little more than cards and dice. To us it was bliss."

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