

NY Giants Spring Training

By Sam A. Christopher



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John D. Rockefeller Estate, Lakewood, NJ

On a bright, sunny Sunday early in March 1943, more than 1,200 Lakewood area folks descended on the downtown train depot. The turnout wasn't for the grand opening of a hotel in the winter resort, nor was it to see heavyweight-boxing champion, Joe Louis train. It was an auspicious, warm welcome for the New York Giants baseball team for their World War II spring training in 1943, 1944 and 1945 in town.

What a reception – one that made headlines in the New York region sports pages. Mel Ott, Carl Hubbell, Ernie Lombardi and Joe (Ducky Wucky) Medwick, all were later enshrined in the National Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, New York.

I was the luckiest boy in town. A sophomore at Lakewood High School, I got to “cover” the Giants for the Lakewood Daily Times with sporadic stories, supplementing my writing the high school sports. A high point was chatting with Mel Ott in the locker room. He was the last Giant to finish cleaning up after a practice at the old John D. Rockefeller Estate, the team's spring home. “Can I help you, son?” Ott asked. After stumbling for words I conversed with the Giants right fielder/manager. The Louisiana native was kind and gracious.

His career high 511 home runs, was the record in the National League until broken by Willie Mays in 1966. Ott spent his entire 22-year baseball career with the Giants and was the National League's leading homer hitter from 1937 until Mays came along. I cherish that meeting with Mel Ott.



Photo Collection of C & H

John D. Rockefeller Mansion, Lakewood, NJ

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Landing the Giants was a gem for my town – the notoriety, publicity with the “Lakewood, N.J.” dateline daily in newspapers and radio coverage by WOR (no TV then) and the shot in the arm for Lakewood’s economy are indelible in Lakewood’s history. The idea was the brainchild of Judge Harry E. Newman, then a County Freeholder, when he invited the Giants to choose Lakewood in a January 7, 1943 letter to team owner Horace Stoneman.

After mentioning the Giants using the Ocean County Park facilities, Newman wrote “We will gladly furnish you with a field, office facilities, shower baths and lockers without charge or cost for any period of time you may elect to use the same.” Newman was the Freeholders’ Park Commission Chairman. The township Committee and the Chamber of Commerce also pushed for bringing the Giants to Lakewood.

The Baseball Commissioner, Kenesaw Mountain Landis, had just ordered the 16 teams to train north of the Mason-Dixon Line to conserve gas, oil, rubber and other essentials for the war effort. The teams had been training in Florida. The teams came from the area, bounded roughly by Boston, Washington D.C., St. Louis and Detroit.

The Giants dispatched their head groundskeeper to Lakewood to design and carve the diamond on one of the Rockefeller’s nine-hole golf course fairways, just south of what now is the Ocean County Police Academy.

The Giants’ top farm team, the Jersey City Giants, in 1944 and 1945 trained on a diamonds across the former Ocean County Fair midway west of the big tennis complex.



Photo Courtesy of corbisimages.com

Left to right are Giant pitchers Cliff Melton, Bill Voiselle, Bob Hering, Ken Miller, Frank Seward, and Bob Wells

A snow fence encircled the Giants spring home for the safety of the 800 to 1,000 fans that would turn out for practice games against the Yankees and other teams. Admission was free. There were no outfield fences so some homers rolled unabated by an enclosure.

One of the sportswriters who honored our town was *The New York Daily News* ace, Dick Young. The tart-tongued Young wrote, “The Giants might not be the best team in the National League but they’ll be the cleanest” – the Rockefeller estate mansion – or golf house as John D. called it – has 17 bathrooms. After staying for their first trek to Lakewood at a small hotel – renamed the Brannick Arms in honor of traveling secretary Eddie Brannick – the Giants switched to the mansion house. They had breakfast at their base location, a box lunch at the training grounds and dinner at the Golf House or for some of the more affluent, a local restaurant.

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I met up with Dick Young at the 1976 groundbreaking for Giants Stadium in East Rutherford. I'm from Lakewood, NJ. You remember Lakewood?" I inquired. "Absolutely, my first sports job with the News. I was in the papers' business division and jumped at the opportunity to get into my first love, sports writing" Young replies. "Is that log-cabin like restaurant where they served the best pastrami and corned beef, still going on a (Second) Street?" Young asked. I told him "Yep, going strong". It was called the Shanty.

The ballplayers and staff were most cordial and dumped a lot of money into town. They got haircuts and a shoeshine in the barber-shop, bought some clothes, went to the movies at the Strand-first run films for 35 cents. They bought candy across Second Street from the Palace, run by the Alpert family, peddled nickel candy bars and Coca-Cola. They bowled at the areas biggest and most modern bowling alley, the 11 lane Pines Mapleways. My pals and I set up pins.

Sub outfielder Denny Gardella, a New Yorker with a great voice, would sing opera on downtown streets at 10:00 and 11:00 at night. One of the most amiable of all of the players was a huge pitcher named Bill Voiselle, who hailed from Ninety Six, S.C. "Where in 'Harry' did the town get that name?" I asked. "Ninety six people in it, now that I left, I guess they'll call it Ninety Five," Voiselle replied in his deep Southern drawl and a broad grim.

My fellow Lakewood High School 1945 classmate, Larry Marcus and I got bus boy jobs at the Brannick Arms and had a real close up look at our heroes. We worked only a couple of hours in the morning for about two days. Interfered with schoolwork. As we loafed around the hotel lobby office, this noise boomed out, "Any mail for Billy Jurges?" Larry and I jumped and turned around and there he was in our midst. "Take it easy boys. How ya doin?" Jurges asked as he put his arms around us, got his mail and left.



Photo Collection of the O'Neill Family

The Giants rode their bicycles from their hotel to their spring training grounds. Backup catcher Gus Mancuso is on the left & star pitcher Carl Hubbell is on the right

The Giants were great newspaper copy. One photo showed Carl Hubbell, Cliff Melton and another elongated pitcher, Hal Schumacher, sporting earmuffs and scarves in the very chilly weather and warming their feet over a hastily made fire. The Giants drew wide publicity as they sometimes were driven to "Rocky's" in horse-drawn carriages used by tourists or pedaled bicycles.

The major leagues today have many Latino players and staffers. The Giants had probably the first Cuban, Adolfo Luque, third base coach.

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Among other Giants who came to Lakewood were Whitey Lockman, Bill Lohrman, Phil Weintraub, Buddy Kerr, Lean (Red) Treadway and Mickey Witek. The press corps, in addition to Dick Young, included John Drebingner of *The New York Times*; Stanley Woodward and Harry Cross of *The Herald Tribune*; Ken Smith of *The Daily Mirror* and WOR's Stan Lomax.

Here's a brief recollection of the Hall of Famers:

- Mel Ott played his entire career for the Giants 1926-1947. Career batting average .304; six-time National League home run leader (1932, 1934, 1936-38 and 1942) and 1,860 runs batted in. Ott was elected to the Hall of Fame in 1951.
- Carl Hubbell, "King Carl", featured a screwball, which twisted his left arm and hand. He won the Most Valuable Player awards in 1933 and 1936 and once won a record 24 straight, and hurled 17 innings in one game. Hubbell was inducted to the Hall of Fame in 1947.
- Ernie Lombardi had the distinction of catching both Johnny VanderMeers two consecutive no hitters while both were with Cincinnati. He had a .306 career batting average and slammed 190 homers. Lombardi was elected to the Hall of Fame in 1986.
- Joe Medwick, outfielder from Carteret, N.J., played for the Giants in 1943-1945 after starring for the St. Louis Cardinals; inducted into the Hall of Fame in 1968.



Phil Weintraub is shown here at Ocean County Park stretching to make a play

Photo Courtesy of corbisimages.com

Today, Ocean County Park comes alive in the spring. The Giants are history, but the pine tree studded park is or has been the home to state level dog and archery tournaments; fishing; flying model battery - driven planes; swimming; shuffleboard, tennis and softball on the hallowed Giants grounds.

The Lakewood, N.J. dateline brought new people to "discover" our town. "It was a great deal, all that publicity and it cost the town taxpayers nothing" said Larry D'Zio, a Lakewood native and retired Lakewood High School baseball coach, teacher, mayor and civic leader. Mr. D'Zio died in 1988 at age 80.

(Editor Note: Mr. Christopher, now 83 years old, worked 62 years as a newspaper reporter, editor and publisher. You can find Sam at every Lakewood Blue Claws baseball game in the Press Box at First Energy Park named in his honor. He wouldn't trade his career for anything).