

Tiger Paws at League Park



By David A. Jones

October 19, 2007 - On a crisp clear early October afternoon I was fortunate to have the opportunity to talk with Hall of Fame third baseman George Kell about his playing days at League Park in Cleveland. Mr. Kell is one of the six living members of the 1946 Detroit Tigers team that played at League Park. Fans would witness the last major league baseball game there on September 21, 1946.

I found Mr. Kell in Arkansas where he makes his home after a long and successful baseball and broadcasting career. George Kell also served ten years on the Arkansas State Highway commission (1973-83). He owns a car dealership, George Kell Motors (1).

What a career he had! Kell batted .306, with 78 home runs and 870 runs batted in, 881 runs scored, 2054 hits, 385 doubles, 50 triples, 36 stolen bases, a .482 slugging average, and 621 walks for a .367 on base percentage. George Kell was inducted into the Baseball Hall of Fame in 1983. (2) George Kell's number was retired by the Detroit Tigers.

This interview is part of ongoing LeaguePark.org effort to speak with those players who played at League Park. In this case I was focusing on those players that played in the last game in September of 1946.

I found George Kell to be an easy person to interview. He took my call and agreed to the interview without hesitation. He was understanding and patient and had a great sense of humor. At one time during the conversation when we were interrupted for a second time by an incoming call at my home he noted that “I need a secretary”.

As we talked I noted the excellent baseball insight that George Kell possessed. This became apparent as we talked about Cleveland playing in two home ballparks. Playing in two home ball parks was unheard in most sports much less major league baseball. On weekdays, day games were played at League Park while on the weekends both day and night games were played at the cavernous Cleveland Municipal Stadium during the 1930's and 40's.

George Kell call this arrangement “unique – the idea of playing two or three games in one ball park and then playing in the big ball park on weekend. It seemed like you had to get acclimated all over again, how I am going to hit in this ball park, I never thought about hitting the same in different ball parks. Certainly in Cleveland (League Park) you tried to go to right field as much as you could and then you go to the big park over there on the lake front, it was a different ball game”.

I asked about the challenges of building a ball club around two different ball parks. He noted that it would be a problem for some ball players but not all. He did think it would bother the pitchers the most especially pitching in League Park with the short right field fence.

Kell says he remembers “lots of balls bouncing off that high wall (right field) and in fact I can remember one I hit that bounced off that wall for a two base hit that would have been caught in most any other ball park”.

Mr. Kell even noted that the second baseman might be involved outfield play if the ball took the right bounce off the right field wall at League Park. As a reminder, the right field wall at League Park was higher than the fabled “Green Monster” at Boston’s Fenway Park.

Today we only have photos which make it challenging to imagine that right field wall at League Park. So I asked George Kell if he would compare the short right field wall at League Park to the Green Monster at Fenway Park?

“I played in Boston for two and one half years and being a right handed hitter I loved that ball park I tried to position myself to pull. I love to hit there (Fenway Park). That Green Monster was a wonderful for a right handed pull hitter. Balls that bounced off that wall would be caught in most ball parks. Fenway Park is similar to the Cleveland ball park; except that it is very deep in right field and very shallow in left field.”

At the time of interview the American League Division Series was ongoing. The famous bug invasion at Cleveland’s Jacob Field had occurred. I could not resist asking about the invasion of bugs and whether Mr. Kell had experienced this phenomenon.

George's humor came out again when he said that "they (the bugs) certainly affected me sitting in my den. I thought my goodness, gracious but I never did see the bugs when I played in Cleveland maybe they did invade the ball park now in then but I don't remember that. I think it was a turning point in the game for the Yankees, it sort of blanked them out for a while."

We then shifted gears and talked about another old park, Tiger Stadium. I wanted to know what he thought about the upcoming destruction of this Detroit landmark. Mr. Kell said,

"It is such an emotional thing in Detroit right now. Do we leave it, renovate or tear it down and turn it into a playground or whatever and build condos on it? It is a very emotional thing for Detroit. People are taking both sides with it and both sides are very verbal. I have not been there in long time and I don't know how I feel about it. I sure do miss that ball park, I spent 38 years broadcasting there besides the 7 ½ years of playing there. I spent 45 years in that ballpark so it is like a home to me".

On that note my time for our interview had expired. I thanked George Kell for his time said good by. George Kell is another outstanding example of the many great players that played at League Park. When we look back at League Park we will remember that George Kell was the last man to hit a triple and the last man to score a run at this historic ball park. Spending a few moments attempting to get a glimpse at League Park through George Kell's eyes had been exciting. I consider myself fortunate to have talked to this Tiger icon. Thanks, Mr. Kell!

- (1) Source – Wikipedia
- (2) Source – Baseball-almanac.com