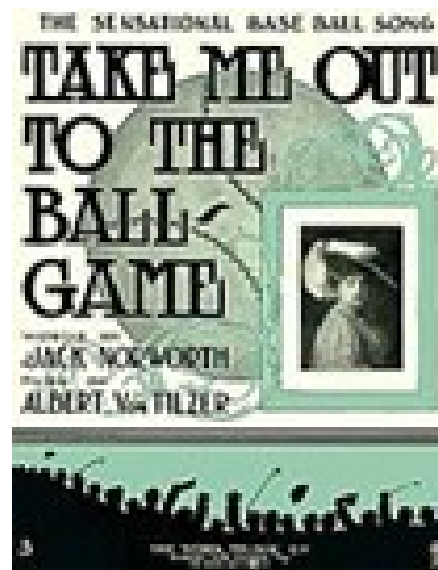


Book Notes #68

July 2021

By Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence
Dr. Andrew Roth

*Take Me Out to the Ball Game's "Feminist"
Origins*



[1]

How many of you have ever heard the entire song *Take Me Out to the Ball Game*? How many of you know who “Katie Casey” and “Nelly Kelly” were, much less Trixie Friganza, Louise Dresser, and Nora Bayes?

Not to mention Jack Norworth, who actually wrote *Take Me Out to the Ball Game*, and Albert von Tilzer, who set it to music? Neither of whom, by the way, had ever seen a Major League Baseball game when in 1908 they composed what has been called “the other national anthem.” [2]

As I've said numerous times, reader comments and suggestions are greatly appreciated; it was a suggestion from John, who, responding to the two earlier **Book Notes** on patriotic music, thought it might be fun to look into *Take Me Out to the Ball Game*. The song's back story, as it turns out, was both more fun and more interesting than I imagined. So, after three weeks of rather dense, if not intense, **Notes** on leadership, this week we'll return to a bit of whimsy by looking at the origins of *Take Me Out to the Ball Game*, its popular culture history, and the light it sheds, albeit faint, on women and immigrants in American history. While not the oldest of the hundreds of baseball-themed songs – that honor, it should interest Jeffersonians to know, apparently belongs to the *Baseball Polka*, which was first published in 1858 by a player from the Base Ball Club of Buffalo [3] – and even if, as one critic opined, “*Stardust* it ain't,” [4] *Take Me Out to the Ball Game*, to borrow a Buffalo-area image, engulfs them all with its Niagara of popularity.

Ouch!

While seeking a less clunky metaphor, let's briefly reprise *Take Me Out to the Ball Game*'s more or less standard history before examining its much more interesting “back story.” For almost everyone, the song is the chorus, not the other two stanzas singing of Katie Casey and, later, Nelly Kelly. As you know, the chorus sings:

“Take me out to the ball game,
Take me out with the crowd.
Buy me some peanuts and cracker jack,
I don't care if I never get back,
Let me root, root, root for the home team,
If they don't win it's a shame.
For it's one, two, three strikes, you're out,
At the old ball game.” [5]

The chorus has been played at the middle of the seventh inning – *The 7th Inning Stretch* – for decades. The custom began in the 1970s when former Cleveland Indians owner and Baseball-Barnum Bill Veeck owned the Chicago White Sox. Allegedly, Veeck overheard Sox announcer Harry Caray singing the song to himself in the radio booth. Thinking if the fans heard Caray singing, off-key as it might be, they'd join in the singing. Veeck had a microphone placed in the booth. The fans heard, joined in song with the unsuspecting Caray, and an institution was born. [6]

It became an overwhelming national fad then tradition in ballparks across the country in the 1980s and 1990s when, for a short time, cable TV made the Chicago Cubs, not the Atlanta Braves, despite Atlanta's advertising slogan claiming otherwise, “America's Team.” By then Caray, who had moved from the South Side Sox to the North Side Cubs on his way to becoming one of baseball's most celebrated announcers, sang it during the seventh-inning stretch at all Cubs home games for their WGN national cable TV audience.

Interestingly enough, it was sung at a baseball game for the first time in Los Angeles at a high school game. Its first use in the major leagues was in St. Louis during the fourth game of the 1934 World Series between the Cardinals legendary “Gashouse Gang” and the Detroit Tigers. [7]

The Cardinals won in seven.

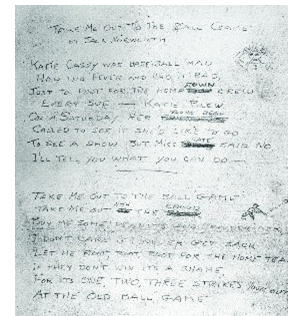
Historical Aside: What's a gashouse? Before the use of natural gas became common, gas had to be manufactured in factories that turned coal into town gas, as it was called, for lighting and cooking. Town gas is a flammable gaseous fuel produced when coal is heated strongly in the absence of air. Distributed via a pipe network it was supplied to homes and businesses.

Factories making town gas were called gashouses.

They were smelly and dirty. Usually located in the worst part of town, they had a reputation for toughness and bad behavior. [8]

The 1934 Cardinals wore their uniforms dirty and played with a belligerence that earned them the label a bunch of “gas-housers,” which then simply became “The Gashouse Gang.” Leo Durocher, Frankie Frisch – the “Wild Horse of the Osage” – and Dizzy Dean were among their stars. [9]

According to its standard and abbreviated history, inspired by a sign that read “Baseball Today – Polo Grounds,” Jack Norworth, a major star and songwriter on the era’s vaudeville circuit, wrote *Take Me Out to the Ball Game* on the back of an envelope in 1908 while riding on a subway train. The envelope is in the baseball Hall of Fame.



As far as it goes, the account is apparently all true. [10]

The song’s lyrics tell the story of Katie Casey, an Irish immigrant lass, which is important later, who was baseball mad and would only accept a date to go to the theater if her boyfriend first took her to a baseball game.

Here is the complete, original version of *Take Me Out to the Ball Game*.

Take Me Out to the Ball Game (Original 1908 Version)

Katie Casey was base ball mad.
Had the fever and had it bad;
Just to root for the home town crew,
Ev’ry sou* Katie blew.
On a Saturday, her young beau
Called to see if she’d like to go,
To see a show but Miss Kate said,
“No, I’ll tell you what you can do.”

Chorus

“Take me out to the ball game,
Take me out with the crowd.
Buy me some peanuts and cracker jack,
I don’t care if I never get back,
Let me root, root, root for the home team,
If they don’t win it’s a shame.
For it’s one, two, three strikes, you’re out,
At the old ball game.”

Katie Casey saw all the games,
Knew the players by their first names;

Told the umpire he was wrong,

All along good and strong.

When the score was just two to two,

Katie knew what to do,

Just cheer up the boys she knew,

She made the gang sing this song:

Chorus

“Take me out to the ball game,

Take me out with the crowd.

Buy me some peanuts and cracker jack,

I don’t care if I never get back,

Let me root, root, root for the home team,

If they don’t win it’s a shame.

For it’s one, two, three strikes, you’re out,

At the old ball game.” [11]

* “Sou” was 1900s slang for a cheap coin of little value – “nickels and dimes,” as it were!

The song celebrated Norworth’s lover, vaudeville star in her own right and militant suffragette, Trixie Friganza. [12] Performed by Norworth and his second wife Nora Bayes, *Take Me Out to the Ball Game* became a vaudeville classic and later an American staple selected by the National Endowment for the Arts and the Recording Industry of America as one of the 365 Top Songs of the 20th century. [13]

With Norworth’s first wife Louise Dresser adding to the mix, the menage of vaudevillians Jack, Trixie (whose real name was Delia O’Callaghan [14]) and Nora, as always, makes the back story more interesting than the historical gloss.

We’ll come back to that in a moment, but first what was vaudeville?

Historical Aside: Although in its French origin the word ‘vaudeville’ means a farce or light comedy with music and dancing, in America it was probably chosen to describe a certain type of music hall production simply because it sounded glamorous. Regardless, vaudeville was the most popular entertainment format of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. After the Civil War, it “marked the beginning of popular entertainment as big business ... as savvy showmen” like Benjamin Franklin Keith took advantage of improved communications and transportation to create a national network of theaters. [15] It amalgamated aspects of music hall culture, burlesque, circuses, minstrel shows, amusement parks, and dime-museums to create the first stirrings of American mass culture. [16]

A *vaudeville* was a live performance in a music hall or theater composed of a series of unrelated acts grouped together. It was a variety show. Frequently sauced with an element of the risqué as female vocalists and dancers cavorted in form-fitting, revealing gowns, a typical vaudeville program included singers both popular and classical, dancers, comedians, trained animals, magicians, jugglers, ventriloquists, lecturers, animal acts and assorted others.

Before he became the Andrew Lloyd Webber of 1900s Broadway, George M. Cohan – the original “Yankee Doodle Dandy” – and his family were major

vaudeville stars. Representing the more wholesome aspects of the genre, *The Four Cohans* were a song-and-dance quartet consisting of Cohan's father, mother, sister and George himself. They ended each performance with George telling the audience "Ladies and gentlemen, my mother thanks you, my father thanks you, my sister thanks you, and I thank you." [17]

Although live vaudeville waned in the 1920s and 1930s, the format dominated both radio (when radio was more than a jukebox) and early TV. *The Ed Sullivan Show* was vaudeville-come-to-TV. (A quick, and purely generational, question: whatever happened to all those guys twirling pie plates on poles?) Almost all of the early movie, radio and television "stars" were former vaudevillians, like, among a host of others, Al Jolson, Jack Benny, Milton Berle, Kate Smith, Abbot and Costello, and Bob Hope.

Even with its politically pointed satire, *Saturday Night Live* is a direct descendant.

So, what is *Take Me Out to the Ball Game's* back story, which sheds a light on women and immigrants in American history? It involves the somewhat risqué nature of its origin, the suffragette background of that story's key figure – Trixie Friganza – and the fact that the woman in both versions – Katie Casey in 1908 and Nelly Kelly in 1927 – was Irish with immigrant antecedents.



Briefly, as sketched above, 29-year-old Jack Norworth, a major Tin Pan Alley figure of the era and a member of the Songwriters Hall of Fame, wrote *Take Me Out to the Ball Game* in 1908 with his lover of the moment – Trixie Friganza – in mind. With von Tilzer's music and first recorded by Edward Meeker for Edison Records, it was one of the big hits of 1908. [18] A clip of Meeker's historic version can be found [here](#). In those days musical "hits" were determined by sheet music sales; the illustration at the beginning of this **Book Notes** is a photo reproduction of the original sheet music cover for *Take Me Out to the Ball Game*.

The woman pictured is Trixie Friganza.

The risqué nature of the song's origin pivots on the fact that Norworth wrote the song to woo Friganza, with whom he was having an affair. Actually, it is more complicated than that. Norworth was married to Louise Dresser, whom he was planning to leave in order to marry his co-star Nora Bayes, but en route to that decision he was dallying with Trixie. Eventually, Norworth divorced Dresser, parted with Friganza, and married Bayes. Bayes and Norworth were one of the era's top acts, numbering among their many famous offerings *Shine On, Harvest Moon*. The marriage didn't last. Bayes was the bigger star, made more money, and resented Norworth's womanizing. [19] They divorced in 1913. But before they did, the duo made *Take Me Out to the Ball Game* famous. Bayes was the first to sing it on a vaudeville stage. [20]

A sanitized version of some of this can be found in the 1949 Gene Kelly/Frank Sinatra movie *Take Me Out to the Ball Game*, the plot of which is similar to 1989's *Major League*, beloved of Cleveland Indians' fans in which a wily female owner attempts to wreck a franchise. A clip of Kelly and Sinatra singing *Take Me Out to*

the *Ball Game* can be found [here](#).

Regardless of the quartet of Norworth, Dresser, Friganza, and Bayes' sexual shenanigans, what shines that "faint light" on women in American history in all of this is Trixie Friganza [21] and the nature of the "pitch" Norworth made to woo her. Friganza was both a major vaudeville star in her own right and a militant suffragette and advocate for women's rights. As Anna Laymon says in *Smithsonian* magazine, "As a well-known comedic actress, Friganza was best known for playing larger-than-life characters, including Caroline Vokes in *The Orchid* and Mrs. Radcliffe in *The Sweetest Girl in Paris*. Off the stage, she was an influential and prominent suffragist who advocated for women's social and political equality." [22]

Friganza was not a passive advocate content to simply lend her name to a cause. She marched and spoke out in support of women's rights and the quest for the ballot. As Laymon continues, "Friganza, an unflinching supporter in the fight for the ballot, was a vital presence in a movement that needed to draw young, dynamic women into the cause. She attended rallies in support of women's right to vote, gave speeches to gathering crowds, and donated generously to suffrage organizations. 'I do not believe any man – at least no man I know – is better fitted to form a political opinion than I am,' Friganza declared at a suffrage rally in New York City in 1908." [23]



Trixie Friganza in large white hat, leaving a suffrage rally, October 26, 1908.

Given that background, when her romantic involvement with Norworth began in 1907, he played to her feminist interests; he knew Katie Casey's desire to go to a ball game would appeal to Friganza. In the early days of baseball, the crowd was entirely male. It was a man's world almost never broached by a woman. Whether or not Friganza liked baseball, she would have supported Katie's desire to enter the man's sporting turf, "operating and existing in what is traditionally a man's space – the baseball stadium." [24] She would have understood Katie, who was 'baseball mad;' who 'knew all the players by name' and teased her beau 'if you want me to go with you, first take me out to a ball game.' Not only did Katie go to ball games, she, like Friganza, was no passive observer. She got into the spirit of the game, acting like any man baiting the umpire – "Told the umpire he was wrong" – and rousing the crowd to cheer, for "Katie knew what to do/Just cheer up the boys she knew/She made the gang sing this song" followed by the famous chorus.

In a lengthy yet marvelous essay at [mlblogs.com](#), preeminent baseball historian John Thorn recounts how by 1910 *Take Me Out to the Ball Game* was a national sensation. It made Cracker Jacks a major commercial success, for although they had been around since the late 1800s their sales exploded after the song became a hit. More importantly, Thorn shares that von Tilzer had his publishing house produce a set of hand-painted glass slides to accompany performances of the song. The slides depicted a beau courting his girl and the girl demanding to be taken to a ball game. [25] This is one of the slides:

In addition to the feminist perspective, *Take Me Out to the Ball Game* also hints

at baseball's role in assimilating immigrants into American culture. It is no accident that in both versions the woman's name is Irish – Katie Casey and Nelly Kelly. Irish-Americans dominated early professional baseball and many of baseball's earliest stars were either Irish immigrants or first-generation American children of Irish immigrants. As Thorn, who is Major League Baseball's official historian, [26] said in an interview on WUWM – 89.7 Milwaukee, "For an immigrant kid, baseball was a way into America." [27] Thorn, whose Polish Jewish parents survived the Holocaust, was born in Stuttgart, Germany and came to America in 1949. Settling in the Bronx, he said he fell in love with baseball cards before he loved the game because the other kids on his block were obsessed with it. [28]



So, becoming American, he fell in love with baseball.

His story is not unique.

In fact, it is one of the archetypal American stories in my *The American Tapestry Project* on WQLN/NPR1 which can be found [here](#). Immigrants coming to America trying to figure out how to fit in begin not with high-minded ideals, but the stuff of everyday culture. And for large swaths of American history, a big part of that everyday culture was baseball.

Playing baseball, collecting baseball cards, talking baseball was a way for the new kid to fit in and find acceptance. As Thorn says, "Baseball is the game that identifies us as Americans. It's our family album. It's what connects us with previous generations within our own family and within the larger American family." [29]

Perhaps a tad naively, Thorn felt baseball to be "one place in life where it didn't matter who your father was or what your wallet held or what your skin color was. It seemed to me that baseball provided a model for what America might only wish to be or hope to be one day." [30]

In the 19th century, it was Irish and German Catholic immigrants; in the early 20th century, it was Italians and Eastern Europeans; in the mid-20th century Latinos from the Caribbean then Canadians and Australians and, in the late 20th century, Chinese, Koreans, and Japanese coming to America.

Some say baseball has a secret Irish history, or at least *Baseball Express* alleges and Katie Casey and Nelly Kelly would almost certainly agree. On St. Patrick's Day 1871 in New York City's Collier's Bar, the first professional baseball league was formed – the National Association of Professional Baseball Players. From John McGraw to Andy Leonard, the first Irish-born professional player, to some of the greats of the game like Pud Galvin and Tim O'Keefe and baseball's original home run king Roger Connor, Irish immigrants dominated early baseball. [31]

Baseball was a portal to acceptance in American society.

This was especially true in the Italian American community. Part of the enduring loyalty of Italian Americans to the New York Yankees– regardless of whether they live in New York City or Omaha, Nebraska or Fargo, ND or Erie, Pennsylvania – results from the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s when the Yankees had Frankie Crosetti,

Joe DiMaggio, and Yogi Berra.

It was Joltin Joe who cemented the relationship.

He was the first authentic Italian-American hero.

But before Joe D., there was western Pennsylvania's own Ed Abbaticchio – the first Italian American to play Major League Baseball and the first Italian American to play professional football. Abbaticchio's time predates the NFL, but he was paid to play football for the Latrobe Athletic Association, the first team entirely comprised of paid professionals. In 1895, Abbaticchio was paid \$50 a game to kick and play fullback. [32]

Primarily a second baseman and shortstop, Abbaticchio made his National League debut on September 4, 1897, for the Philadelphia Phillies. This was at a time when Italian immigrants came under vicious attacks by nativistic bigots.

Abbaticchio was a living rebuke to such insults. A great minor league hitter, as a major leaguer, he struggled over a 14-year career between 1897 and 1910 when he played for the Boston Doves – another name for the bedraggled Boston Braves. Abbaticchio played for the 1909 World Champion Pittsburgh Pirates, where he was a close friend of Pirate legend Honus Wagner. He almost won the 1908 pennant for the Pirates when a ball he hit into the stands was erroneously called foul by Hall of Fame umpire Hank O'Day. Over time the story evolved into an urban legend that Abbaticchio had cost the Pirates a pennant by hitting a woman in the stands with a batted ball. Actually, he hit a game-winning home run and the umpire blew the call. [33]

As Katie Casey would shout, “The ump’s wrong!”

So, reader John was correct – there is more to *Take Me Out to the Ball Game* than “peanuts and Cracker Jacks.” Its genesis has its own spice – which Trixie Friganza understood. Born Delia O’Callaghan she changed it to Trixie Friganza for the stage because in turn-of-the-century America an Italian name sounded more exotic. More importantly, to the attentive listener, the song highlights women’s struggle for equal rights and baseball’s role – sports, in general’s role – in enlarging American society, welcoming the stranger, and making America a better place for it.

Take me out to the ball game!

For those interested, here is Norworth’s revised 1927 version. It is essentially the same except that Katie Casey is now Nelly Kelly and a few other minor tweaks. By 1927, the song was a major moneymaker, and Norworth reworked it to renew his copyright!

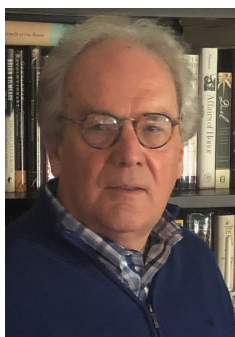
Take Me Out to the Ball Game – 1927 Version

Nelly Kelly loved baseball games,
Knew the players, knew all their names,
You could see her there ev’ry day,
Shout “Hurray,” when they’d play.
Her boyfriend by the name of Joe
Said, “To Coney Isle, dear, let’s go,”
Then Nelly started to fret and pout,
And to him I heard her shout.

Chorus

Nelly Kelly was sure some fan,
She would root just like any man,
Told the umpire he was wrong,
All along, good and strong.
When the score was just two to two,
Nelly Kelly knew what to do,
Just cheer up the boys she knew,
She made the gang sing this song.
Chorus [34]

Tune in to my podcast, *The American Tapestry Project* on WQLN NPR 91.3FM public radio where I explore the post-1968 shattering of the American story by asking “What is the ‘story of America’? Is there such a thing? Is there only one story, or are there many stories? If there are many stories, how are they woven, can they be woven, together to tell *the* story of America?”
Past programs are posted to WQLN’s website and can be found [here](#).



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End Notes

1. **Photo Credit:** *Take Me Out to the Ball Game* original sheet music cover with Trixie Friganza at **Wikicommons** available at <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:TakeMeOutBallgameCover.jpg> accessed July 18, 2021.
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21. **Photo of Trixie Friganza: This Photo** by Unknown Author is licensed under [CC BY-SA](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/)

22. Laymon, Anna, *The Feminist History of ‘Take Me Out to the Ball Game,’* **Smithsonian Magazine** (October 10, 2019) available at www.smithsonianmag.com accessed July 19, 2021.

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