

How Ballston Spa's Ira Felix Thomas scored baseball fame as Hero of 1910

By Maurice "Christopher" Morley
As told to Ann Hauprich
April 2010

BALLSTON SPA — Among the many historic records in my office at the corner of Bath and Front Streets are artifacts involving a village native who held the position of catcher as well as team captain for the then national champions: The Philadelphia Athletics.

The name of Ira Felix Thomas, who was born in Ballston Spa on January 22, 1881, also appears in Baseball Hall of Fame record books as the first pinch hitter to get a hit while “at bat” in the World Series game that pitted The Detroit Tigers against The Chicago Cubs

That milestone occurred during the October 10, 1908 game and 100 years later Ballston Spa Mayor John P. Romano issued an Official Proclamation declaring October 11, 2008 Ira Felix Thomas Day in the village. Since the proclamation also coincided with the 50th anniversary of the death of the great baseball player, there was quite a bit of media coverage at the time.

My reason for choosing this month to dust off my files about Ira Felix Thomas is that I was recently reminded by one of his relatives, Cathy King Eddy, that it was 100 years ago (on April 14, 1910) that then President Howard Taft threw the first-ever pitch by a US president. The Washington Senators were playing against the Philadelphia Athletics and guess who was the starting catcher for the Philadelphia A's?

Although the Senators won that landmark game, just a few months later – in November 1910 – a celebration in honor of Ira Felix Thomas was held at the once bustling King House Hotel at 50 West North Street — which then belonged to the ancestors of Cathy and Ira. Guests at the grand establishment (which ceased to exist roughly half a century ago) were eager to honor Ira for his part in winning the World Series against the Chicago Cubs.

What none could have known in 1910 was that Ira Felix King would continue his professional baseball career as a Scout or that many of his relatives – with last names that include DeCora as well as King – would go on to play many a friendly baseball game in the village that Thomas always proudly regarded as his Home Base.

Another interesting tidbit involving one of the members of the King family that came to my attention courtesy of Cathy King Eddy – who now resides in Connecticut but frequently visits friends and loved ones in Ballston Spa, follows: “Joseph William King and Mary Agnes (Marie) Delaney who were married in June of 1913 traveled to New York City and then onto Philadelphia for their honeymoon. While in Pennsylvania, they decided to visit Joe’s cousin: Ira Felix Thomas. Ira was playing professional baseball for Connie Mack with the Philadelphia Athletics who played the Boston Red Sox while Joe and Marie were in the city. Ira’s wife, Katherine, was very much involved in his career. Although it wasn’t customary for women to attend baseball games, both Joe and Marie accompanied Katherine to the ballpark to watch the game from box seats. Unfortunately, the Athletics lost that game on Saturday, June 21, by a score of 4 to 5. The Athletics had recently finished their longest winning streak from May 27 to June 10, which was just before Joe and Marie arrived in Philadelphia. After that game, the Philadelphia Athletics were 42 and 15 in the win - loss column. They ended the season with 96 - 57 and in first place in the American League. The team then went on to win the World Championship Series 4 - 1 over the New York Giants. Ira played a pivotal role in that World Championship Series.”

But one of the most treasured items in my collection is a copy of a 1957 newspaper account of a letter Ira Felix Thomas wrote to Charles G. Heninger, who was the Mayor of Ballston Spa during its Sesquicentennial celebrations just over 50 years ago. In it, Ira graciously declined an invitation he had received, citing health reasons. (He had a damaged heart muscle and was temporarily confined to a wheelchair.)



In the letter, Ira reminisced about his happy boyhood memories of playing ball in the back of The King House Hotel where he wrote: “our team, the Monikers, would play.”

Noting that this was “my first year out of baseball since 1902,” he said it saddened him “to know I cannot make the celebration and meet my old friends or see the town of my birth again.” He later added: “It looks as if time is running out on me (but) I have had a very happy life.”

Among his most treasured mementoes was the photo taken a century ago that is reprinted here where a beaming Ira Felix Thomas was surrounded by members of his boyhood team: The Monikers. The caption on the back of the picture states that Ira caught for Philadelphia in the series against the NY Nationals (now the Giants). In front row (l. to rt.) are Ed Tracy, Tim Sullivan, Ira Thomas, Bill McNeirie and Paul Powers. Back row are Bill Van Dyke, Tom Kelly, Jim Munne, Bernard Cabanaugh, Hank Hale, Hiro Settle, Joe Hennessy, Pete Lamoreaux and Joe King.

If anyone else has photos of Ira Felix Thomas, I would be delighted to see them and, with your permission, to make copies for them for future generations to enjoy in the Village History Consultant’s Office and at Brookside Museum – which is just a stone’s throw from my door.



Please turn the page to view additional images of Ira Felix Thomas and visit www.LegaciesUnlimited.com to read an expanded tribute to "The Hero of 1910" penned by Timothy Hauprich who attended a November 2010 celebration of the baseball great's legacy that was hosted by Cathy King Eddy on the 100th anniversary of the date when the group portrait at top was taken. Inset photo of Cathy and husband Chuck presenting Chris Morley with a copy of the photo was snapped by Ann Hauprich in April 2010.



Catching memories of "The Hero of 1910"



Ballston Spa Village History Consultant Chris Morley and son Edward were among the invited guests at a celebration of the legacy of Ira Felix Thomas that was held at the old Chocolate Factory on November 10, 2010. To view related reflections and additional photos taken that evening, please visit www.LegaciesUnlimited.com. The historic image on facing page courtesy of the now late Cathy King Eddy, who was photographed standing beside a portrait of "The Hero of 1910" on November 10, 2010.

