

Cincinnati Reds Findlay Market Opening Day Parade

In the summer of 2010 my friend Andy Strasberg, who was marketing director for the San Diego Padres when I was Vice President Marketing for the Cincinnati Reds, called to ask for a favor. He was putting together a hardbound book titled Baseball Fantography, a collection of snapshots from fans and 23 stories, three by Andy and the rest by friends on a variety of topics. Andy asked if I would write on the topic of parades because of the Reds Findlay Market Opening Day Parade. I told him I would be honored. -- Roger Ruhl

Baseball Fantography (2012)

Chapter Two – Parades

By Roger Ruhl

New York has its Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade. Pasadena has the Rose Bowl Parade. And New Orleans has a series of colorful parades during Mardi Gras. But if you grew up in Cincinnati and followed the Cincinnati Reds through thick and thin, no parade can compare to the Findlay Market Opening Day Parade.

In the early spring of 1971 I attended my first meeting of Major League Baseball public relations and promotion directors in Tampa, and one of the agenda items was about promoting Opening Day. I was startled to learn that Opening Day was not a sellout everywhere, like it was in Cincinnati.

For well over a century, the Reds have always played their opening game at home. Most people presume this is a privilege for baseball's oldest franchise, but Reds historian Greg Rhodes and Cincinnati Enquirer sportswriter John Erardi set the record straight in their book *Opening Day: Celebrating Cincinnati's Baseball Holiday* (Road West Publishing, Cincinnati, Ohio 2004), the definitive work on the subject and a source of information for these words. As the southernmost major league city in the late 1800s, Cincinnati was viewed as a warm weather alternative to Boston, New York, Philadelphia and Chicago. By the 1930s when the tradition was challenged by another ballclub, the oldest franchise rationale was advanced successfully to thwart the challenge.

As a result of opening at home annually, Opening Day took on a special significance in the city. Tired of winter, Cincinnatians devoured news accounts of spring training and its warm weather knowing their day in the sun was only weeks away. Anticipation built in the weeks and then days leading up to the start of the baseball season. And when the magical day finally came, the festivities started with an annual parade.

Early marchers were members of rooters clubs, but eventually the rooters club from Findlay Market grew so much larger than the others that its members with their large white hats and canes came to dominate the parade.

Findlay Market, located about 15 blocks north of the city's center at Fountain Square, has evolved into a covered open-air collection of shops and vendors selling meats, poultry, fish, produce, dairy products, flowers and other staples for the family table. It dates to 1852 when Cincinnati's Over the Rhine neighborhood bustled with immigrants and the city was the sixth largest in the U.S. thanks to Ohio River commerce. A National Historic Register designation was conferred in 1972.

Over the Rhine has presented challenges for the city over the years. Decades of flight to the suburbs left the area with the city's poorest residents. Now, government and civic groups are once again working to find a compatible blend of urban poor, long-time residents and merchants, and suburban transplants seeking a gentrified lifestyle in renovated lofts, new condos and apartments. Arts venues run the gamut from storied Music Hall with symphony, opera and ballet to small theatres with edgy productions. Trendy shops and eateries are opening. Unperturbed by generations of development starts and stops, Findlay Market has survived quite nicely.

Findlay Market's pre-1971 parade contingent was mostly merchants and their friends walking the eight-tenths of a mile from the marketplace west to Crosley Field, known earlier as League Park, Palace of the Fans and Redland Field.

Since 1971, the destination has been downtown Cincinnati near Riverfront Stadium and now Great American Ball Park. Live television coverage sparked increased and broader participation, but the parade itself remains no slick extravaganza. A horse drawn carriage. A flatbed truck. Several high school bands. A police color guard. Some Boy Scouts. An old fire engine. Shrine clowns in their mini-cars. Unicyclists. Former Reds players. Findlay Market businesses with their names on the side of convertibles, sedans or trucks. Peanut Jim, until his death in 1982. When Marge Schott owned the Reds, she and her dog Schotzie were mainstays, as was her larger Schotzie, an elephant from the Cincinnati Zoo. Marge loved the parade.

Many fans lining the parade route have tickets to the ballgame, but most spectators do not. This is as close to Opening Day as they can get. They are there to be a part of the happening, to soak up the atmosphere and get in the baseball spirit. The demographic mix is across the board.

Businesses generally recognize the day as a holiday and expect and understand there will be a drop in worker productivity. Televising the game has been a long tradition, so fans without tickets gather at watering holes for business meetings or in company lunchrooms. Many workers simply go to lunch from one to four o'clock. Game broadcasts can be heard in many classrooms.

My first Opening Day was in the early 1960s when someone gave four tickets to a friend's dad, and my buddy invited me to go along. It was so special. I've never seen greener grass than the blades at Crosley Field that Opening Day. A ticket to Opening Day was an excused absence from school. It still is, with only tacit apologies to No Child Left Behind.

My 13 years in the Reds front office provided plenty of memories. Some of my favorite ones are from Opening Day. My daughter got to take a friend and be part of the hoopla and enjoy the parade. My late parents were life-long Cincinnatians and baseball fans. They met on the softball fields of Northside and South Cumminsville. The idea that their son worked for the Reds was hard for them to imagine. They had near-perfect attendance at the Reds games, and I am very grateful for having been able to give them this gift in their healthy retirement years. Opening Day was one of their favorite days.

Cincinnati Reds President Bob Howsam, architect of the Big Red Machine, told his staff to take time to smell the roses. Writing these words helps me realize that the Findlay Market Parade rose is one whose bouquet I never really took in to the fullest. Next year, I'll be there.

#