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Remembering Bud Sharpe, Ballplayer

Many people express appreciation for the stories from West Chester history that appear on this web site. Most come in the form of emails that offer praise or ask questions about some piece of local lore. Occasionally they arrive with corrections, and once in a while, they contain an offer to contribute to this site.

Today's article introduces such a contribution. A man named Charles Weatherby wrote "I recently completed a 10,000 word biography of former major league baseball player Bayard H. `Bud' Sharpe, West Chester's most popular athlete from the mid-1890s to 1916" and asked if I would consider posting it. After reading his work and offering some suggestions, I've posted his final draft on this web site. It's not only a good story about an early baseball player; it also gives a feel for how important baseball was to this town. At a moment when the closest thing we've got to a home team -- the Philadelphia Phillies -- are in spring training to prepare to defend a World Series championship, Weatherby's work seems especially timely.

Weatherby's own story is interesting as well. He went to college in Tennessee and finished at East Tennessee State in 1965. From there, he went to work at the Wilmington (Delaware) Department of Public Welfare in 1965 and held a variety of social work positions until 1970 when he left to get a graduate degree in Virginia. During that time, he also served in the Delaware National Guard and was part of the force that patrolled the streets of Wilmington after the 1968 riots. It was also during that period that he got to know Bill Killefer, another major league player who lived in West Chester for a time. After Virginia, he moved to Idaho and then eventually to California, where he wrote his biographies of Killefer and Sharpe.

Weatherby's biography of Bud Sharpe appears below, and his biography of Bill Killefer appears on the SABR web site. Both offer some good reading and an unusual look at West Chester's past.



"Bud" Sharpe



Bud Sharpe, Ballplayer

By Charlie Weatherby

Like most places in the United States in the late 19th century, baseball consumed the energy and interest of young men in West Chester. A number of local men got to play the game professionally, but even local amateur baseball clubs attracted hundreds of spectators to their games which were played at the State Normal School (now West Chester University) and at Sharpless Field (where the shopping center on E. Gay Street behind the D-K Diner is now located).

One of the most successful players to come out of West Chester was Bayard "Bud" Sharpe. Sharpe was born on August 6, 1881 to Howard W. and Elizabeth (Carey) Sharpe. His father was a bricklayer and contractor who, in partnership with Alban Ingram Jr., operated from an office at 10 N. Church Street and built many of the Borough's earliest brick-lined storm sewers. Sharpe & Ingram "created some of the largest institutions in the Keystone State, among which are the State Normal School at West Chester," according to the *Los Angeles Times*. Howard Sharpe was also a sportsman whose exploits with the West Chester Hunt Club were frequently mentioned in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* between 1897 and 1900.

Bud Sharpe's mother "Lizzie," was the daughter of John Carey, a carpenter whose progeny became some of the first homeowners in Riggstown (on E. Nields Street near the railroad tracks). Unfortunately, Lizzie died when she was thirty and Bud was only nine years old, so he and his younger sister Edith were raised by his father and stepmother, the former Maggie Cope, who married Howard Sharpe in 1892.

Bud Sharpe was a gifted child and started piano lessons by age eight and was an expert by age 12. At age ten, he began singing with the choir at Holy Trinity Church on S. High Street. But at an even earlier age, his parents noticed that "Little Bud" did not crawl like most infants. Instead, when he reached the age when others were scooting about on hands and knees, Sharpe startled the members of his family by running rapidly down the hall of their house at 314 West Barnard St. and sliding through the parlor door and under the sofa, executing the last maneuver with a perfect "hook slide." Thereafter, it was a foregone conclusion that he would be a professional baseball player.

Bud Sharpe received his education in the public schools of West Chester. While he was still in school, Sharpe played baseball on the junior teams around town, and also played basketball and football in high school and for the "Active Athletic Association." He became a star baseball player for West Chester High School, and after graduating in 1899, he enrolled at Pennsylvania State College in the fall.

Sharpe played his first collegiate baseball game on April 14, 1900 and got five hits including a triple, stole a base and scored four runs in a 19-3 demolition of Susquehanna. Sharpe made

some pretty plays at shortstop and also pitched, striking out five. The following year, he became the Penn State team captain while continuing to pitch and play shortstop. The highlight of his second college season was a game against the West Chester State Normal School on May 17 which drew a large crowd that contained many of his hometown friends. Sharpe entertained them with a single, triple and home run while pitching his team to an 11-4 win. Penn State finished the season with an 11-3 record.

In college in 1902, Sharpe was Penn State's leading batter with nine hits, including two home runs, two doubles and a triple, and the team posted a 6-2 mark. The Nittany Lions were a .500 baseball club in 1903, but Sharpe had two hits in at least three of their ten ball games. When he wasn't playing baseball, Sharpe played on the 1902 Penn State basketball team, was a member of the cadet military battalion, sang in a quartet, and had a leading role in a drama production.

During his summers, Sharpe began playing semi-pro baseball with the Brandywine baseball club of West Chester. The "Brandywiners" were well-known and since they formed in 1865, had produced a number of major league players including Doc Bushong, Joe Battin, Jack McMahan, Mike Grady and Joe Borden. By then, Sharpe was a tall and energetic right-hander who stood 6'1" and weighed 170 lbs. Sharpe attracted the attention of the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, which wrote that "the State College athlete, is playing a fast and brilliant game at first base for the Brandywines" after they beat the Chester Athletics 6-4 on July 28, 1901. The next year, an *Inquirer* writer called "one of the best all-around athletes in State College," but also reported in early August that Sharpe had contracted typhoid fever. The case was severe enough that three weeks later, the Brandywine team played a benefit game to help pay for his medical care.

Sharpe graduated from Penn State in May 1903 with a degree in electrical engineering. The college offered him a position as a mathematics instructor, which he rejected in favor of baseball. According to the *Daily Local News*, he played for a professional team in Harrisburg that summer even though he "was in ill health at the time and believed that a year on the diamond would be the best kind of medicine." There is no evidence of the results of his time with Harrisburg, since no official statistics were published and his name did not appear in any newspaper accounts of their games. He also played for Brandywine in West Chester that summer and served as the team's captain.

In the fall of 1903, Sharpe took a position as mathematics instructor at Bellefonte Academy, 15 miles north of State College. But by 1904 he was back in West Chester again, this time as an employee of the Sharpless Separator Works, whose owner Philip M. Sharpless sponsored a number of local athletes. While working as a "specialist" for Sharpless, Sharpe continued to play for Brandywine where he had his best season ever. For example, in the second game of a doubleheader with Berwyn on May 30, Sharpe collected four hits including a double and a triple, and scored five runs in a 25-0 rout. In the most highly anticipated game of the season, a September 21 match played in Philadelphia against arch-rival Wilmington, Sharpe played centerfield, went 2-for-4, and beat out an infield single to get on base before scoring the run that tied things up in the sixth inning. Brandywine went on to win 7-3 and to take home a thousand dollar prize. By the end of 1904, Sharpe had heard from a number of major league teams and signed a contract with the Boston Nationals, who were managed in those days by Al Buckenberger.

In the fall of 1904, Sharpe wed Bertha Elizabeth Thorp on October 5 and took a job teaching electricity at Penn State during the winter. His fiancée was "prominent in musical circles," according to newspaper accounts, and the daughter of John Thorp, a local undertaker who spent more than a decade as a member of West Chester's local government. Sharpe's new mother-in-law, Ida (Wiltbank) Thorp, was born in England and said to be a direct descendant of William Shakespeare, and was known in West Chester for her church and charity work.

Bud Sharpe made his major league debut with the Nationals on April 14, 1905, but it was not a good start. He was hitless in three at-bats in a 10-1 loss to New York, and it took him four days to get his first hit off Brooklyn's Harry McIntire in the home opener, which Boston won 4-2. Things improved however, and after a 5-0 victory over Chicago on May 11, a reporter for the *Boston Globe* wrote, "Two catches by Sharpe in right were the features of the game, one within a few inches off the ground, and the second after a running jump."

Unfortunately Sharpe's performance cooled off after that. In June he made three appearances at catcher, but had trouble with some balls hit to him in right field. Then his manager, Fred Tenney, heard reports that Sharpe had urged four of his teammates to jump to the Tri-State League, an "outlaw" organization that offered good salaries to players from struggling teams. Tenney was not amused and he fired Sharpe on June 15 after he went hitless during an 11-2 loss to Cincinnati.

All he had to show for his first major league season was 56 games with a .182 batting average and an unimpressive .904 fielding average. Within a month, Sharpe got an offer to join the Tri-State League's Coatesville team, but attendance was poor and the team finished the 1905 season in Shamokin with a 56-69 record, 22 1/2 games behind Williamsport.

Other teams were still interested in Sharpe and in December 1905, he signed on with the Scranton Miners of the New York State League for 1906. They won the pennant that year and Sharpe played in every game, finishing with a .295 average, ninth in the league. He also finished first in the league with a .990 fielding percentage and his 150 assists were 44 more than his nearest pursuer. Minor-league salaries were still too little to support him and his wife, so during the 1905-1906 off-season, Sharpe continued to work as an electrical engineer, supervising the installation of several large power plants in Pennsylvania.

In mid-April 1907, Bud signed a contract with the Newark of the Eastern League, where he would stay through 1909. As team captain all three years, he played first base and usually batted fifth in the order. But after getting hit in the head by a pitch on July 16, Sharpe struggled for the rest of the season and finished with a .210 batting average in 125 games. Newark finished with a 67-66 record, tied with Jersey City for fourth-place. That winter, Sharpe stayed in the New York area to work as a physics and electricity instructor and coached the baseball team at the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn.

In 1908, Newark was managed by George Stallings, a man with years of experience in the major and minor leagues. This turned out to be the beginning of an eight-year association, and Newark finished in third place with a 79-58 record, its highest finish in six Eastern League

seasons. Sharpe hit .270 and was third in the league with 151 hits, while leading the league with 146 games and a .989 fielding average.

After the regular season ended, the Newark team played an exhibition in West Chester against the Sharpless Athletic Association team on September 25. A large crowd turned out and before the game, friends presented Sharpe with a gold purse. (Newark won the game 2-1; Sharpe was hitless.) That fall, he stayed in West Chester to organize a soccer team. But the following spring, he went to Milledgeville, Georgia where he took a position as the baseball coach at Georgia Military Academy from February to May.

During his 1909 season with Newark, Sharpe once again attracted interest from major league scouts, and his new manager, New York Giant Hall-of-Famer Joe McGinnity, thought Sharpe was "one of the best first basemen in the country." By the time the season ended, Sharpe had been drafted by the Pittsburgh Pirates for the following year, and Newark finished in second place with an 86-67 record. Sharpe hit .241 in 156 games and led the league for the third straight year in fielding with a percentage of .994. The *Daily Local News* quoted a Newark newspaper which wrote that Sharpe's "deportment here has always been that of a gentleman," and before the start of the last doubleheader of the season, the umpire presented Sharpe with an engraved gold watch on behalf of some well-connected fans who wanted to give him a lasting token of their admiration.

During the off-season, Sharpe worked as the manager on George Stallings cotton plantation in Haddock, Georgia. He and his wife also took off for a few weeks during the winter, to visit friends and in-laws in West Chester. Then in early spring 1910, Sharpe reported to the Pirates spring training camp in Hot Springs, Arkansas, despite a case of malaria which he had picked up while in Georgia.

Sharpe started at first base on opening day, but the job was not yet his. Jack Flynn, the former first baseman at St. Paul, Minnesota, also wanted the position. Sharpe went 1-for-4 on opening day in a 5-1 win over St. Louis, and 2-for-4 the next day with a triple and two runs in a 6-5 loss. But after going hitless during the next two games, Sharpe was benched and Flynn got his chance. On April 28, Pittsburgh manager Fred Clarke chose Flynn and traded Sharpe, along with pitcher Sam Frock, to the Boston Nationals for pitcher Kirby White.

The 1910 season went badly for Boston which finished in last place. Sharpe did somewhat better and batted .276 through July, but then finished the season with a .239 batting average in 115 games and a .987 fielding average at first base. He also missed a game in July due to another malaria attack and played what wound up being his last major league game on September 24, a 4-2 loss to Cincinnati.

Sharpe's professional career wasn't over though. For the 1911 season, his friend Stallings signed him to play for Buffalo in the Eastern League and named Sharpe the team's captain. He started the season hitting well and finished with a .281 batting average, 26 stolen bases, and a league-leading fielding percentage (.992), but became ill once again and had to leave before the season ended. He and his wife went back to Stallings's Georgia plantation where Sharpe resumed his duties as manager. Meanwhile Buffalo finished in fourth place with a 74-75

record. One bright spot resulted when Sharpe became friendly with a player named Bill Killefer, the Buffalo catcher. Killefer went to the Philadelphia Phillies at the end of Buffalo's season, but came to West Chester in 1917 to marry Sharpe's sister-in-law, Margaret Smith Thorp.

Stallings placed Sharpe on waivers on November 18, and then two days later, both men and their wives nearly died when the Stallings house burned to the ground. They remained friends, however, and by Christmas, Sharpe had been hired to manage the Oakland Oaks of the Pacific Coast League with Stallings' support. Expectations for the club, which had finished in third place in 1911, weren't high, but with Sharpe managing and playing, the club ended up in first place after the final game of the season with a record of 120-83. Sharpe finished with a .300 batting average in 101 games.

His health was shot, however. The *Oakland Tribune*, which once called him "a perfect wonder at the bag," announced on September 6 that "Manager Bud Sharpe ... is a sick man, being confined at home with a severe attack of pleurisy The long season on the coast worked havoc with his constitution" and speculated that he would be unable to return in 1912. On October 28, the day after the season ended, Sharpe resigned from the team.

He and his wife returned to Stallings' Georgia plantation, but during 1912 and 1913, Sharpe left several times to serve as a scout for Stallings, who was by then managing the Boston Braves. While on a scouting trip to Oakland in November 1913, he played first base in two games for an Oakland Winter League team called Boyle and Lawlor and got five total hits while driving in five runs in the second game. But his health continued to fluctuate and he spent most of his time on the plantation until, on May 31, 1916, he died from tuberculosis at age 34 after a six-week illness.

His wife Bertha took his body back to West Chester by train the next morning and his father-in-law conducted the funeral on Saturday, June 3. With his parents already gone and his younger sister Edith dead from tuberculosis in 1903, Sharpe was the last surviving member of his family. He was buried in the family plot at Greenmount Cemetery on Westtown Road, while the flags at the Oakland ball park flew at half-staff.

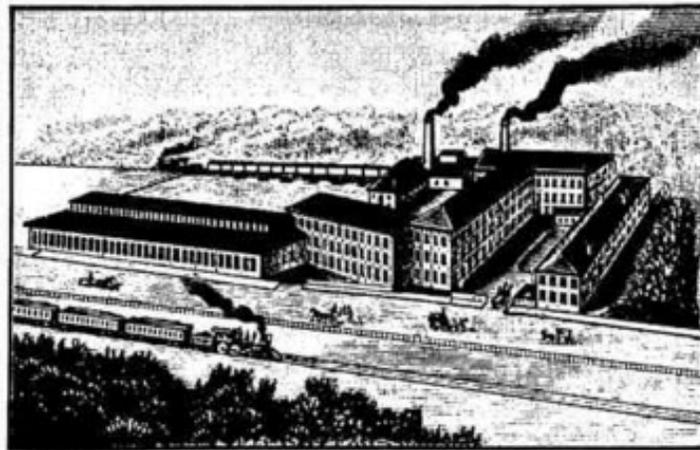
Roughly a year later, Sharpe's widow Bertha, who was only 32, married her husband's benefactor and friend George Stallings, who was himself a widower after losing his second wife to disease in 1913. They wedded in West Chester on May 7, 1917 and nine months later, she gave birth to George Jr. He grew up on the plantation and played baseball for the University of Georgia; his father died in 1929 and his mother followed in 1952 at age 67.

In his short professional career, "Bud" Sharpe did things that most West Chester men of his generation could only dream about. He made baseball his profession and played in the majors, set records for fielding and did very well as a hitter and a coach. He also got to play on teams with Hall-of-Famers like Honus Wagner, "Iron Man" Joe McGinnity, and pitcher Vic Willis. He also made significant contributions off the baseball diamond in part-time careers as an electrical engineer and a college instructor. His greatest accomplishment came in 1912 when he guided the Pacific Coast League's Oakland Oaks to their first pennant. In his obituary,

the *Daily Local News* was certain that "had he been able to retain his health, [he] would doubtless have become a manager equal to the best in America." For a man of his era and background, Sharpe's achievements made his life remarkable.



314 W. Barnard Street in West Chester, where Bayard 'Bud' Sharpe grew up



SHARPLESS SEPARATOR WORKS.

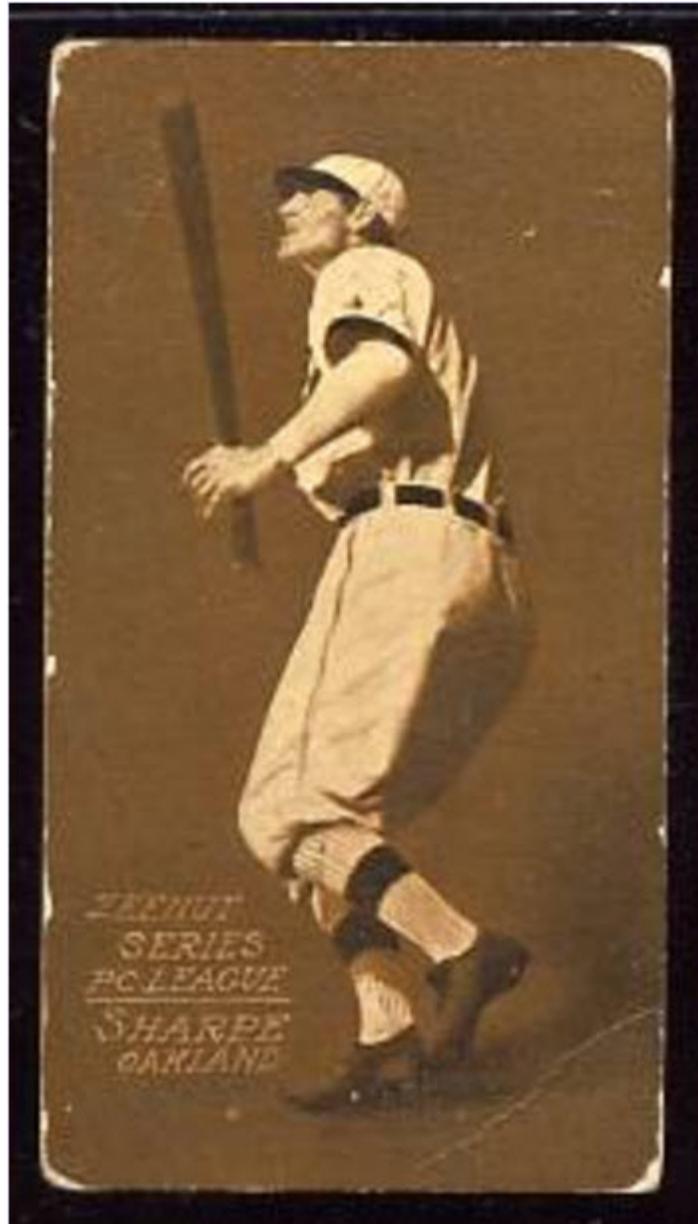
The Sharpless Separator Works, where Sharpe worked during the summer of 1904



Baseball card showing Sharpe with the Boston Nationals



Another baseball card showing Sharpe with the Boston Nationals



Baseball card from Sharpe's time with the Oakland Oaks



Sharpe's gravestone in Greenmount Cemetery (Photo courtesy of [Dan Lindley](#))

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