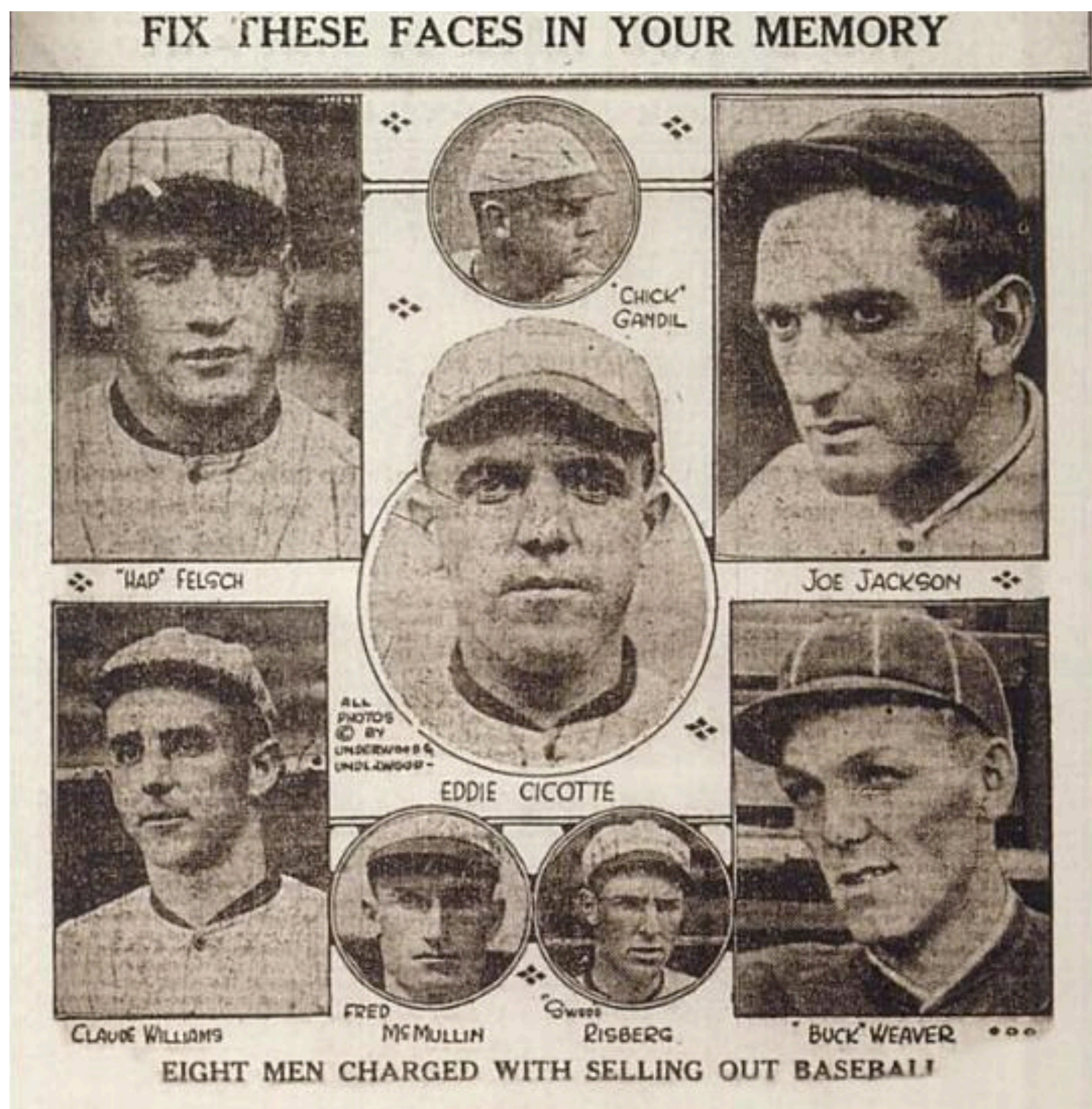
"White Sox, Black Sox, Gray Sox"

Rhys Heyden

COMM 270 – How The News Media Shape History

April 2012



(*The Sporting News*, Oct. 7, 1920)

I. Introduction

October 1, 1919 was a scorching, sunny day in Cincinnati, and as the sun beat down on the city suddenly teeming with visitors, all anybody could think about was baseball. The National League Champion Cincinnati Reds were playing their first ever World Series game that afternoon against the fearsome Chicago White Sox, American League Champions and consensus favorite. While the game was certainly on the minds of all the fans, it was also of the minds of a small circle of gamblers – Joseph "Sport" Sullivan, "Sleepy" Bill Burns, Billy Maharg, Abe Attell, and Arnold Rothstein – who had conspired with several White Sox players to throw the Series. The fix was on.

Ever since that fateful day in 1919, what came to be known as the "Black Sox Scandal" has maintained a firm hold on the American sporting zeitgeist. What was a bombastic, jaw-dropping story at the time remains compelling, relevant, and emotional for journalists, baseball fans, and historians to this day. As the story played out during 1919 and the early 1920s, newspapermen across the country wrote the first draft of the "Black Sox" story. Sporadic articles in the coming decades added new caveats, but it was Eliot Asinof's 1963 novel *Eight Men Out* that opened the floodgates and presented the entire tale in a cohesive, well-researched narrative. John Sayles' 1988 film of the same name provided potent images and a throbbing heart to the narrative, and a variety of contemporary journalists and historians are still uncovering new details and revelations almost 100 years after the fact.

Given the amazing amount of coverage the scandal has received, one particular point is remarkable: we still have not gotten it right. Understanding of the scandal has certainly deepened over time, and news media have trended towards providing a more complete telling as the years pass. However, a wholly accurate and balanced picture has remained elusive. Many factors have contributed to the continuing inadequacy of the media coverage, but one factor in particular is

paramount – simplicity. The desire on the part of journalists, baseball owners, historians, and the general public for a clear, understandable, and rectifiable version of the scandal has warped the story in multifarious directions. This warping has taken the form of seesaw, over-corrective shifts of blame. First the ballplayers, then the gamblers, then the owners, have all taken their turn as the villain du jour, with the news media largely getting an undeserved free pass. The many players in this scandal were all pushing for individual, distinct media narratives, and often the only things these narratives had in common was their simplicity – a villain and a hero, a black and a white. This impulse for simplicity has largely stymied the real story, and kept the complete, messy, and complicated truth from being fully revealed and explained. White Sox, Black Sox, and then White Sox again, the major players in this scandal have rarely been fully portrayed as they truly were – Gray Sox.

II. Background

The 1919 World Series took place between October 1st and October 9th, with the Cincinnati Reds emerging as 5-3 victors in the best of nine series. The action captivated the nation in an era where baseball was truly was the national pastime. As Eliot Asinof notes, “The excitement of the Series was prevalent throughout the country…Over 100,000 miles of wire were to be used for this purpose, servicing 10,000 scoreboards in 250 cities, from Winnipeg, Canada, to Havana, Cuba” (4). As the Series commenced, big money was being bet on the White Sox – as expected – but big money was also, puzzlingly, being placed on the Reds. Asinof mentions that the *New York Times* reported this shift of the betting odds right before Game 1 as a strange phenomenon: “Until yesterday, it seemed that…the Reds could carry little except moral support. But late yesterday afternoon, the situation underwent a sudden a surprising change that was little short of startling” (42-43). With hindsight, we know that up to eight White Sox – George “Buck” Weaver (3B), Arnold “Chick” Gandil (1B), Charles “Swede” Risberg (SS), Fred

McMullin (Backup), Oscar "Happy" Felsch (CF), "Shoeless" Joe Jackson (LF), Eddie Cicotte (P), and Claude "Lefty" Williams (P) – were involved in conversations with an unorganized ring of gamblers looking to fix the series. These players would come to be known as the "Black Sox." Many of these players would later argue about the extent of their involvement, but most would later confess to taking money in order to blow games and ultimately lose the Series. To the vast majority of those who followed the Series, it was shocking to see the mighty Sox fold to the inferior Reds. Not so for any of these gamblers, most of the "Black Sox", and all of the people who they tipped off. Those who bet wisely came away with substantial winnings.

Rumors swirled about the fix throughout the Series but, as I later discuss, the talk was almost entirely limited to the private sphere. Very little was published in the news about the possible fix, and no action was taken on the part of Charles Comiskey, White Sox owner, or by baseball's National Commission (President August Herrmann, NL President John Heydler, and AL President "Ban" Johnson). Incredibly, as baseball historian Gene Carney points out, despite the many rumors and abundant evidence, the grand jury of Illinois' Cook County was not directed to investigate gambling problems in Major League Baseball until September 7, 1920 (Carney, XI). Even that investigation was primarily sparked by a suspicious game between the Chicago Cubs and Philadelphia Phillies on August 31, not the 1919 World Series rumors. It did not take long for the grand jury to collect damning evidence and, on September 28, they handed down indictments to all eight "Black Sox" players connected to the fix. Comiskey, reluctantly, but immediately, suspended the eight players from his team indefinitely. After a great deal of chaos (seesaw press coverage, dramatic confessions by Cicotte, Jackson and Williams, the mysterious disappearance of those confession transcripts in December 1920, and new indictments handed down to the banned players and 10 gamblers on March 26, 1921) the "Black Sox Trial" finally began in Chicago on June 27, 1921 (Carney XII). After much high drama, the

trial ended on August 2, and no one (gamblers or players) was found guilty of any charges. The courtroom erupted in celebration, and the players "…grabbed each other by the arms and danced around," (Asinof 272). However, new MLB commissioner Kenesaw Mountain Landis, handed down his own draconian verdict the very next day:

> "Regardless of the verdict of juries, no player who throws a ball game, no player who undertakes or promises to throw a ball game, no player who sits in confidence with a bunch of crooked ballplayers and gamblers, where the ways and means of throwing a game are discussed and does not promptly tell his club about it, will ever play professional baseball!" (Asinof 273).

All eight "Black Sox," in addition to St. Louis Browns second baseman Joe Gedeon (who had placed bets after learning of the fix from Risberg), were banned from professional baseball for life. Despite several subsequent protestations and lawsuits from the players, their pro careers were finished. The scandal was over, but the media story had only just begun.

III. Discussion

It is helpful to break down media coverage of the Black Sox Scandal into 3 rough chronological periods. The first includes all primary source newspaper articles, and lasts from the outset in October 1919 until a few months after the trial and Landis' verdict, in late 1921 and early 1922. The second period encompasses 1922 until roughly 1990, when sporadic articles revealed new details, and the two most influential sources on the matter – Asinof's 1963 novel and Sayles 1988 film – were disseminated. The last period, from 1990 until the current day, includes a few new revelations and, more importantly, an increased emphasis on the narrative complexity of the scandal, eschewing the previously dominant paradigm of simplicity. The drive for simplicity, which emanated from owners, players, historians, the general public, and journalists themselves over many generations is primarily responsible for the distortion and flaws that have characterized media coverage of this scandal. As always, there are exceptions to the rule, but they are few and far between in the overall simplistic hero vs. villain narrative that still dominates popular perception of the scandal to this day.

Newspaper coverage of the Series in 1919 understandably revolved around the games themselves. The World Series was the biggest sporting event in the country, and readers wanted to know who beat whom. Typical of this kind of coverage is *The Democratic Banner* of Mt. Vernon, Ohio, which, after Game 8, simply printed a large box score, the screaming headline "REDS WORLD'S CHAMPS," and picked up an Associated Press recap of the game action on the front page. On September 28, right before the outset of the Series, the *New York Tribune* printed a full-page special entitled "White Sox Favored To Win World's Championship," which went through all the "dope" (colloquial for matchups) to simplistically conclude that the AL champs should win. This conclusion was almost willfully ignorant of the fixing rumors that were omnipresent in reporters' gossip at the time (Asinof 45-46). Enterprising reporters like Hugh Fullerton and Ring Lardner began to sniff around at the rumors but, for the time, it would remain no more than sniffing. As Carney notes, "There was practically a phobia of libel in the press of that day, and it no doubt was a factor in the reluctance of newspapers to report specific charges and names" (Carney 316). Pressured by editors to stick with the simple, straightforward story, many journalists acceded to this whitewashing.

Whitewashing, however, was not unique to the journalistic profession. Hugh Fullerton, one of the first journalists to catch onto the fix, was also a close friend of Charles Comiskey. Carney cites Fullerton's 1935 recounting of the scandal in *The Sporting News* (a notable early exception to the rule of the simplicity paradigm), wherein the reporter reveals that he confronted Comiskey, AL President "Ban" Johnson, and Pittsburgh Pirates owner Barney Dreyfuss in Cincinnati before Game 1 with his knowledge about the fix. Shockingly, all three men had already heard about it (Carney 40-42). To Fullerton's surprise, all three men also refused to take any action. Fullerton writes that he called them, "…a bunch of whitewashing bastards who were letting a bunch of crooks get away with it because they were afraid of losing money" (Carney

42). Though clearly enraged, Fullerton could not publish any of this, and even sat on his hands for nearly 20 years, until after Comiskey's death, to publish this bit of crucial back-story in 1935. Baseball's owners were also guilty of pushing an inaccurate agenda of simplicity. Though they were privately incensed at the crooked ballplayers and gamblers, they publically maintained the pure image of their sport in order to keep revenues strong and prevent fans from getting disillusioned.

Roughly a year after the Series, the Cook County grand jury began to convene, indictments were handed down, and three "Black Sox" confessed, dramatically, to their participation in the fix. At that point, the scandal narrative suddenly burst from the private into the public sphere. It is important to note that the media were reactive, not proactive, in the case of this story. Spurned gamblers like Billy Maharg (who *gave* a front-page exclusive to the *Philadelphia North American* about the fix the day before the indictments were released), suspicious actions by the Cubs and Phillies on August 31, and the independent confessions by Cicotte, Jackson, and Williams were primarily responsible for the shift in the narrative. There was little notable muckraking by journalists, and certainly no desire for an investigation from the owners (Carney 45). Once the story had broken, however, newspapers across the country covered the suddenly villainous ballplayers with a remarkable fervor. Many newspapers (including the *Sporting News* on October 7, 1920) ran a vicious cartoon called "Fix These Faces In Your Memory" that showed the eight indicted "Black Sox" looking dour and editorialized that they were "eight men charged with selling out baseball." The scandal, which had previously been covered only sparingly, in the sports section, and often in hushed tones, was suddenly front-page material. On September 29, the *New York Tribune* ran a bold A1 headline stating: "Eight White Sox Are Indicted; Cicotte and Jackson Confess Gamblers Paid Them $15,000." The players took center stage as the villains, and the owners and gamblers were secondary and tertiary figures, at

best. Comiskey was even commended by the Associated Press on that same *Tribune* front page for having, "…smashed his pennant chasing machine to clean up baseball," in almost complete ignorance of how hard Comiskey had been trying to avoiding doing that very thing. Comiskey, it should be noted, paid for the exorbitant lawyers fees for all eight ballplayers during the trial, trying to maintain his ballclub to the last chance. Although this was an entirely different media narrative than the one that had frustrated Fullerton during the Series, it was still an ignorantly simple narrative on the part of the newspapers – eschewing the pervasive corruption of all parties in favor of portraying a clear villain – the crooked ballplayers. The mainstream press was also close to a year late on this story.

With the transition into the next media epoch, the Black Sox Scandal witnessed another seesaw, over-corrective, and simplistic shift in its orientation. Namely, Asinof's novel and Sayles' film vilified the owners and gamblers while sanctifying the players. Asinof considered himself a journalist, and the book was an investigative piece, though it significantly remains devoid of footnotes. Sayles' movie was a Hollywood production and thus a pseudo-piece of news media, but it remains a credible adaptation of Asinof's work. Though these two works (particularly the novel) were based in fact, and revealed a richer, more complete version of the events than firsthand accounts, they were still flawed. Take, for example, Asinof's description of Comiskey's crookedness. Comiskey, who Asinof describes as a notorious skinflint with his players, had a practice of treating the writers who covered the Sox like royalty in order to sway their coverage. Asinof writes that, "For them he had a special room…laden with succulent roasts and salads…and a bottomless supply of fine bourbon to liven their spirits. His generosity *here* was unmatched" (21). In the opening sequence of Sayles' film, the wry Fullerton is dismissive of the lackey reporters who eagerly flock to the "special room" to toast to Comiskey's good health. Though this was an actual practice of Comiskey's (and many other owners, for that matter),

Asinof and Sayles rely on its thematic potency as an emotional crutch to make their point – Comiskey is the villain for treating his players like dirt while treating reporters like kings. It also offers a convenient rationalization for while the players chose to fix the series: they weren't getting paid, and they weren't getting respect.

Sayles' film is told from the perspective of Buck Weaver, the White Sox third baseman, whose role in the scandal is a contentious issue. Asinof correctly wrote that Weaver never took any money from gamblers, had the second-highest batting average of anyone on the team during the Series, and protested his innocence throughout the trial and after his expulsion from baseball. In Sayles' film, we are made to believe that Weaver (who, notably, knew about the scandal and said nothing) is a pure, misunderstood hero. Asinof even devotes several maudlin pages at the end of his book (279-282) to bemoan Weaver's lifetime ban and depict him as a kind of martyr. To be sure, Weaver was empirically the least culpable of the "Black Sox," but Asinof and Sayles' emotional, un-footnoted depictions of Weaver's situation are overly simplistic, and cast him as a kind of hero. Even Shoeless Joe Jackson (who *did* take $5,000 from the gamblers) is largely portrayed as an illiterate galoot who didn't know any better and who didn't deserve his ban, particularly in the film. This shift in the news media narrative, exemplified by the improved (but still flawed) depictions by Asinof and Sayles, still succumbs to the corrosive underlying agenda of simplicity. In their eyes, Comiskey is a villain and the players are (albeit somewhat untraditional) heroes.

In the final epoch of the news media narrative, almost 100 years after the scandal first broke, balance is finally being restored, and the story is beginning to be portrayed in its messy, unsatisfying totality. Carney's 2006 book and Stefan Fatsis' 2005 article in the *Wall Street Journal* (which cites Carney frequently) are two key pieces of work in restoring balance to the narrative. To counter the Asinof/Sayles viewpoint, Fatsis points out that:

> "In the revisionist interpretation of the scandal, Mr. Comiskey's inaction certainly makes him a villain. But he probably doesn't deserve the reputation as a tightwad whose parsimony drove his players to cheat. *All* players in those days were exploited by owners…Carney says the White Sox payroll might have been among baseball's highest, while Mr. Lindberg says the team owner was generous with many players. Rather than trying to get back at Mr. Comiskey, the Black Sox were probably just trying to score easy money" (1).

Asinof and Sayles' deification of the ballplayers seems a tad overwrought in light of this information. Carney, however, is also unafraid to challenge the moral high ground of the owners and gamblers, pointing out that the players took the blame while the news media was unwilling, at the time, to criticize the higher, more culpable powers that influenced the scandal. To wit, Carney opines, "…Would *Five Burglars Out* be a fair name for the Watergate scandal?" (XV). Ultimately, Carney and Fatsis come to the conclusions that all parties are to blame in one sense or another and that, outside of a few outliers like Hugh Fullerton, news media coverage of the scandal was wholly unsatisfactory.

IV. Conclusion

A simple hero vs. villain, black and white media narrative is almost always easier to digest and comprehend, and it is often foisted on stories that are ill suited for such simplicity. The facts of the Black Sox Scandal, when fully considered, are fairly damning for all parties and fit the hero vs. villain paradigm rather poorly. Eight baseball players sold out the entire game and disillusioned a nation for the sake of a few thousand dollars. The corrupt Charles Comiskey is currently enshrined in the Baseball Hall of Fame. Gamblers like Arnold Rothstein and Abe Attell made mountains of money and avoided prosecution entirely. Sports reporters continued to drink bourbon in their special room at Comiskey Park. It's no wonder that the country started to view athletes and sports in general with a more cynical lens after the scandal. The "Black Sox" are the archetype, and every subsequent sports betting scandal (like that of Pete Rose) is inevitably compared to what happen in 1919. The news media narrative has long been painted in alternating black and white, and we're just now starting to see the scandal in its proper shade of gray.

Works Cited

Asinof, Eliot. *Eight Men Out*. New York: Ace Books, 1963. Print.

Associated Press. "Reds World's Champs." *The Democratic Banner* [Mt. Vernon] 10 Oct. 1919: 1. *Chronicling America*. Web. 20 Apr. 2012.

Carney, Gene. *Burying the Black Sox: How Baseball's Cover-Up of the 1919 World Series Fix Almost Succeeded*. Washington, D.C.: Potomac Books, Inc., 2006. Print.

Eight Men Out. Dir. John Sayles. Perf. John Cusack, David Strathairn, Charlie Sheen. MGM Home Entertainment, 1988. DVD.

"Eight White Sox Are Indicted; Cicotte and Jackson Confess Gamblers Paid Them $15,000." *The New York Tribune* 29 Sept. 1920: 1. *Chronicling America*. Web. 20 Apr. 2012.

Fatsis, Stefan. "For the Black Sox, a New Wrinkle." *The Wall Street Journal* [New York] 27 Oct. 2005. *For the Black Sox, a New Wrinkle*. Web. 20 Apr. 2012.

"Fix These Faces In Your Memory." *The Sporting News* 7 Oct. 1920. *Chronicling America*. Web. 20 Apr. 2012.

"White Sox Favored To Win World's Championship." *The New York Tribune* 28 Sept. 1919: 22. *Chronicling America*. Web. 20 Apr. 2012.