

Baseball Champs, 1949, West Side Rowdies

By Dick Jenkins, August 2020



Original photograph provided by Gerry Donahue

West Side Rowdies, Manchester's Town Champions for 1949

Front row: Cliff Hawkes, Jim Roach, Harold Moore, Ron Pelletier, Carlo Petricca, Don "Speck" Flavell and Henry Agostinelli

Back row: Billy Frey, teaching coach, Tom Benoit, Roy McGuire, Allen Johnson, Don Finley, Billy "Junior" Pagani and assistant coach, Nate Agostinelli

The appearance of Billy Frey, back row, far left, has given me reason to return to the past and gather some of Bill's story. He graduated from Manchester High School in 1949, the year of this photo. As a twelve year old kid making the west side my new home, and spending a good deal of my time at the FourAcres I soon learned of his reputation as an athlete. Let there be no doubt, this photo contains some of the best athletes that played the game in town in those days. But today I want to celebrate Billy Frey.

Allow me to quote from news articles by Earl Yost, Sports Editor of the Manchester Evening Herald. "Frey left an impressive record on both schoolboy and semipro diamonds when he left for service two years ago. He became the high school's first-string catcher while only a sophomore and no one could oust him from behind the plate. His best year was in 1949, his final season, when his teammates showed their respect for him as a leader and a backbone of the club. They elected him captain. Bill proceeded to lead his charges to an even break in a 14-game schedule and posted a fine .421 batting figure with 19 hits in 49 trips to the plate, including five triples and one homer. In CCIL competition, Bill sailed into the ball for a .388 clip, second in the league, although the Indians finished fourth.

Considered a fine prospect, Twilight League teams bid for his summer service in the semi-pro circuit, at that time one of the best in the state. Moriarty Brothers won out and Bill was added to the roster in 1948. The British Americans had romped to three straight titles, Frey was one of the leaders for the Gasmen who stunned baseball fans by conquering the BA's in the playoffs for the town title. Only a junior in school, Frey climaxed his first season in the ranks with a mark of .320. He went 10 for 25.



PFC. WILLIAM FREY

Bill played with the MB's three seasons, and with Pagani's West Sides one year. Always capable of getting wood on a ball. Frey yearly was among the low men in the strikeout department. Twilight League records show Bill fanning only 11 times in over 150 at bats.

Frey played two years of American Legion Junior ball and captained the team in 1948.

Bill enlisted or was drafted into the Army during the Korean Conflict. During a night patrol in Korea he received injuries that left him paralyzed from the waist down. He would return home where his condition was treated at Cushing General Hospital, Framingham, Massachusetts. From that point on I don't believe Bill ever called 6 West Street in Manchester his home.

Less than two months after the end of the Korean Conflict both he and Navy Ensign, Andrew Riker III were honored by Manchester's citizens on September 19, 1953. A huge parade took place. Connecticut's LT. Governor and numerous other state and city government officials took part in the celebration. Again I quote front page headlines from the Herald. "Today is a day of celebration. A soldier's welcome home will be tendered two local servicemen who answered their country's call, served with the armed forces in the Korean Conflict and have returned home. The two have been selected as representative of Manchester veterans who served in the Korean War."

On Sunday, the following day, Bill was honored with a baseball game played on the Four Acres. Excerpts of Hal Turkington's comments appearing in the Herald read as follows: "Billy Frey received a warm welcome home to the West Side Oval, the scene of his boyhood days, and more than 1,500 neighbors and fans greeted the youthful star athlete. Of secondary importance was the benefit baseball game in which the Twilight League Old Timers turned back the High School baseball stars 4 to 2."

For those of you of that era let me list a few of his high school mates expected to play this Sunday since their mention should bring back fond memories. Bill's understudies, Red McCarthy and Ed Kittle will appear behind the plate. Pitchers are Nino Petricca, Ernie Knoske, Paul Uriano, Leo Day and Skip Kearns. Others to play will be Walt Fox, Bob DiBattisto, Bernie Alemany, Bill Pagani, Moe Silverstein, Augie Davis, Cliff Hawkes, Don Hubbard, Ron Pitki, Jim Minicucci and Ray Finnegan, if they are home on furlough, and several others that Wally Fortin, who will coach them, rounds up.

Four most valuable players in the Twilight League, Art Pongratz, Jerry Flood, Cliff Keeney and Jackie May will be in action along with Jake Banks, Chunky Smith, Johnny Green, Mike Saverick, Dick Cobb, Tony Berube, Jack Holloman, Ralph Schunick, Vic Taggart, Willie Oleksinski, Tom Martin, Mike Zwick, Swede Solomonson, Buck Bycholski, Harold Geer and others.

"Bill Pagani, originator of the day and general chairman, was overwhelmed at the response by West Siders and town-wide sports fans who did a tremendous job in welcoming Frey home. The American Legion Band and the Manchester Pipe Band provided a one hour concert. Legionnaires paraded to the Frey home as an honor guard and brought Bill, his mother and sister to the field. The ovation Bill received still echos over the Four Acres."

"The ballgame itself was an added tribute to Frey. Included among the 25 old timers who participated were many who hung up their spikes four and five years ago. Some of them have been out of action longer than that and never played with or against Bill, but they turned out in fine fashion to aid in the cause of a league-mate. The high school youths were augmented by other players because most of Bill's 1949 team are in service now, while two others, just recovering from operations, sat with the team but could not play."

"Nino Patricia and Red McCarthy formed the starting battery for the high school stars while Jackie May took the hill and tossed his stuff to Art Pongratz, It was like old times when George Olds walked to home plate, took off his soft hat and announced the starting batteries for the teams. Nick Angelo, former president of the league and an official for 19 years, handled the vets with Ty Holland coaching at third base. Wally Fortin was at the reins for the schoolboys."

Bill passed away in January of 2000 at the age of 69 years. The following is a portion of his obituary.

He was born in Manchester and had resided in Norwood, MA for the past forty-six years. He was a retired disabled Veteran of the Korean War and a member of the U.S. Army Paralyzed American Veteran's and Disabled American Veteran's. Mr. Frey was a player and coach of PVA New England Clippers Wheelchair Basketball Team.

He is survived by his wife, Catherine L.(Boudreau)Frey; four children, Sgt/Maj. William S. Frey of Fort Lewis, WA; Lori Lawlor of Mansfield, MA; Lawrence E. Frey of Wrentham, MA; and C.J. Tomasello of Norwood, MA; a sister, Mary Cipolla of East Hartford; a brother, Henry Frey of Manchester; and seven grandchildren.

Burial Services will be held at 12:00 p.m. in St. James Cemetery in Manchester.

Dick Jenkins - MHS 1955
Niceville, Florida. 32578