



TRIBUNE FILE PHOTO

Chicago's Wrigley Field is the second oldest Major League Baseball stadium still in use after Boston's Fenway Park. The field first opened its doors in 1914 and has been the regular home for Cubs games since 1916.

Trip includes bucket-list trek to 'Friendly Confines'

There's an old saying for baseball lovers. True fans of the game must make it to Wrigley Field in Chicago and Fenway Park in Boston at least once in their lifetime.

Even though the Cubs are more than 15 games under .500, when an opportunity to make baseball's holy pilgrimage arises, it has to be taken. It was time to work on that Bucket List.

My chance came on a warm afternoon on a bright summer day in early August. The temperature was peaking just north of 80 degrees. With the highly popular music festival Lollapalooza setting up shop a few miles south, I thought fans for a Friday afternoon game with the Cincinnati Reds in town would be somewhat sparse.

But I was greeted by 40,000 near-rabid Chicago patrons clamoring for the first pitch. The sight of a sell-out crowd initially impressed me. I could see why generations of baseball fans have considered

Wrigley and its brick-covered ivy outfield walls a home away from home.

While struggling to make it to my seat near the front of the upper deck, a series of new observations began to overwhelm my once giddy mindset. The aisles were narrow; the concrete cracked; the seats rusting. The stadium itself seemed to be caulked together in places.

It felt a shame to me as a baseball enthusiast that something so great could be suffering in such poor condition. The field, of course, was well kept, groomed

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like a Paris Hilton Chihuahua. But the stands had let themselves go.

Then again, maybe it was only my own irrational expectations crumbling in front of me like the concrete ramps to the upper deck. A specimen, even one as fine as Wrigley Field, would undoubtedly face the wear and tear of millions of wild Cubs fans coming and going since its construc-

tion in 1914.

I can only image how grand the game would have seemed from a seat on Chicago's North Side years ago; how perfect things would be back in the day prior to the top section of the stadium being added in 1927, doubling the seating capacity. Those once-immaculate seats, now capped by more seats, have a strangely obstructed view of the action with an unnatural-feeling roof above their heads. From

Wrigley: Impressed with fans

FROM 1S

the back rows of the lower deck, only a thin panoramic-looking window of the game is visible.

Seriously, if it's not a line drive, you won't see it.

And with the friendly confines of the park plunked down in a neighborhood, any more expansion beyond its current 41,000 seats in unthinkable. To make up for a relatively low capacity by modern standards, apartments across the street have fashioned their own bleachers on top of roofs, a clever and amusing sight above the viney outfield walls.

But a glance back into the field of play on that August day yielded a less enjoyable view for locals. The Cubbies had yet to muster a hit off Cincinnati's Bronson Arroyo and would eventually be blanked for the eighth time in 2010. Arroyo was tossing a gem and the action was limited in what would become a 3-0 sleeper.

My first shot at historic Wrigley Field and the Cubs couldn't get a runner to third until the ninth inning. The grounds crew could stage a glorious fireworks display after every scored run, but alas, I'll never know.

I am utterly impressed with the Chicago faithful because of games like that one, though. They flood the stadium, nearly selling out the place every game, despite a tough product to watch on the field and 102 years without a World Series. Kudos to you, Cubs fans. Your dedication is admirable.

Except for the two fans who proceeded to get into a slapping fight in my section 509. A back-and-forth chorus of "No, you come down here" between the men became difficult to ignore until one of them finally reeled off and pawed the other's face, all because one brought a friend — and a Reds fan — into their home. I guess it wouldn't be a visit to the city without some drunken signs of violence.

But it's not the house, rather the residents and their passion that make Wrigley Field a baseball heaven, despite its aging face. It's got tradition up the wazoo, and I can get behind that. Any pushes for renovation would probably be met with fierce adversity as the place is a bonafide historic monument.

And in the long run, it's that tradition that keeps hordes of folks like me coming out from all over the country; lifelong fans who just want one taste of something bigger than themselves. Nobody's there to look at the stadium and criticize it. They're there for the feel of the game, the romantic essence of a time more innocent, before electronic scoreboards, steroids, million-dollar contracts and free agency.

In the end, it's just about feeling like a kid again. And no matter how faded the once-fresh ballpark's glimmer has become, Wrigley Field will continue to have an undeniable draw and people will come.

People will most definitely come.