

History lesson with the Nats

Who says the first-year Washington Nationals don't have a tradition? They certainly do, 71 years of one, and the best place to learn it is by reading a new coffee table book called "Nationals on Parade" (\$34.95, Orange Frazer Press, 207 pages, illus.) by Mark Stang and Phil Wood.

Granted, the price is a little hefty for a history lesson, but this is one you'll enjoy. And there won't be any final exams.

Stang, a veteran baseball author, and Wood, an area broadcaster now conducting a daily baseball show for XM Satellite Radio, have assembled a book much more interesting than many of the players it covers. (After all, the original Nationals/Senators won just three pennants from 1901 to 1960 and the expansion Senators none from 1961 to 1971.)

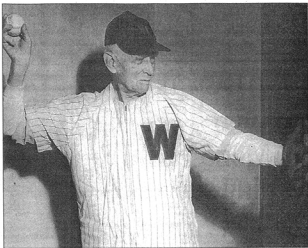
The volume contains more than 225 photos (whittled down from about a thousand, Wood says) in pristine black-and-white — even ones from the first decade of the 20th century. Aided by the wonders of digital restoration, many undoubtedly look better than they did originally. The pictures come from 12 private and public archives and took more than two years to assemble.

Accompanying each is a succinct description of the person or persons shown, plus a summary of each player's career and what happened to him afterward.

It's hard to pick favorites, but two of mine show a pair of Washington icons. Hall of Famer Walter Johnson, the second-winningest pitcher in baseball history (416, all with Washington), is pictured as a 19-year-old rookie in 1907 wearing a black uniform with a high collar. At the other end of the age spectrum, we see longtime owner Clark Griffith pretending to throw a pitch at age 82 while wearing a Washington uniform circa 1952. Why? Who knows?

Both men are pictured numerous other times. Griffith presents a season pass to Franklin Roosevelt in April 1945, a few days before the president's death, while incongruously holding a handbag presumably meant for first lady Eleanor Roosevelt. And a smiling Harry Truman dedicates a Walter Johnson memorial.

Most of the subjects are far less renowned, as befits a franchise described in vaudeville days as "Washington: First in war, first in peace and last in the American League." For in-



stance, the first player seen is William "Boileryard" Clarke, a catcher from 1901 to 1904 who probably wasn't even a household name in his own household.

And did you (or anybody else?) know that Chick Gandil, one of the ring-leaders of the Chicago Black Sox who threw the 1919 World Series, played for Washington from 1912 to 1915? Or that Johnson, supposedly a failure as manager after his pitching career ended, actually won more than 90 games in three seasons as Nationals skipper (1930-32) but didn't come close to winning a pennant?

Also intriguing is a picture of Joe Kuhel, the team's fancy fielding first baseman of the '30s. Kuhel's most memorable moment, however, came when he was fired as manager of the 1949 Nats, who went 50-104 and became the first Griffith team to finish last. At a press conference following his dismissal, Kuhel reportedly noted, "You can't make chicken salad out of chicken feathers." However, some earwitnesses could have sworn he said something other than "feathers."

There also is a memorable portrait of the Griffith family in 1925, including a smiling 11-year-old Calvin Griffith, actually Clark's nephew but who was raised by the Griffiths. Thirty-five years later, we see an unsmiling Calvin — now the Nats' owner — telling re-

porters the team "will never leave Washington in my lifetime." A few months afterward, with Griffith totally undead, the club became the Minnesota Twins.

Also shown is shortstop Pete Runnels (1951-57), who won two American League batting championships after Calvin traded him to Boston. I was so fond of Runnels that I named my dog after him, which Pete might not have considered a compliment.

All of Washington's baseball greats are here: Bucky Harris, Sam Rice, Goose Goslin, Joe Judge, Mickey Vernon, George Case, Cecil Travis, Buddy Myer, Buddy Lewis, Bob Porterfield, Eddie Yost, Roy Sievers, Harmon Killebrew, Bob Allison, Frank Howard, Dick Bosman, et al.

And, oh yes, Joe Cronin. The hard-hitting shortstop played for and managed the Nats to their last pennant in 1933 — and also was Clark Griffith's son-in-law. But when the team fell to seventh place the following season, Griff peddled him to the Red Sox for the then-astounding sum of \$225,000. This prompted more than a few men in D.C. and environs to remark, "I wish I could get a quarter-million dollars for my son-in-law."

The Stang-Wood book is entertaining and informative — and you'll learn why Washington indeed has a baseball history, if not necessarily a winning one.