***One Hundred Years Ago***

By John Clayton

Recently, the Boston Red Sox celebrated the hundredth anniversary of their iconic home field, Fenway Park, by hosting the New York Yankees for a midweek day game, wearing throw-back uniforms, playing in the sunlight as God intended. This reminded me of a book I read a few years ago: *The First Fall Classic*, by Mike Vaccaro (Doubleday, 2009). The book is subtitled: *The Red Sox, the Giants, and the Cast of Players, Pugs, and Politicos Who Reinvented the World Series in 1912.* This was one of the most enjoyable baseball books I have ever read, and I have read a few.

This particular World Series took place, in the first year of Fenway Park, between the American League pennant-winning Red Sox and the dominant New York team of the era, the Giants. The book’s best feature is not so much the baseball but the picture of an era that it draws. The players, with the exception of a few major stars, were not highly-paid, and even the stars wouldn’t make close to what a veteran utility infielder in today’s game makes, even with inflation adjustments; however, even for the rank and file, it was a decent living for the times. The players were generally rough and uneducated, and teams dealt with north-south and Catholic-Protestant rifts among the players. The players were all white, of course, as African-American players were banned for almost four more decades.

Baseball was hugely popular in those days, along with horse racing and prize fighting. College football was big, but not professional football. Basketball was a niche sport at best. As we’ve all been reminded many times by now, 1912 was the year of the Titanic, but it was also a presidential election year. Third Party candidate and former president Teddy Roosevelt was shot and wounded, but not seriously, while campaigning during the night of the sixth game of the series, and the book also follows a big time New York City murder trial that the author considers the first “trial of the century.”

Were the players, who were not becoming fabulously wealthy, merely playing for the love of the game? Not quite. Some of the more dramatic plots surrounding the game concern—what else?—money. The players were not paid a lot for the World Series by today’s standards, but the series check was a significant part of one’s earnings for the year, not just a nice little bonus. The players were already steamed that their take was calculated out of the first four games only, so that they wouldn’t artificially extend the series, which ends when one team wins four games, to its full seven games. Then the second game ended in a tie, necessitating an additional game, and the powers-that-be decided that the players’ share would not include the extra game, should it become necessary.

For the owners, however, there was nothing to prevent them from extending the series to line their pockets. The Boston owner was suspected, with overwhelming evidence, of holding his star pitcher, the virtually unhittable Smoky Joe Wood, out of game six, so that New York would have a better chance of winning and prolonging the series. It worked, and the series took eight games. I won’t spoil the ending for those of you who might have forgotten how the 1912 World Series ends, but game eight went to extra innings and the ending involved miscues that may not have been rivaled until Bill Bucker came along in 1986. There’s much more to the story than I have described.

The United States was a very different place a century ago, and we are certainly better off in most ways, but perhaps not in all ways. I can’t believe that this year’s election between Mitt Romney and Barack Obama, and this year’s World Series between the New York Yankees and the Washington Nationals, will be nearly as interesting as those of a hundred years ago, but you never know.