

Niese brings Hall of Famer Grimes to life in new book



1 HOUR AGO • BY BRANDON BERG | BRANDON.BERG@LEE.NET

Burleigh Grimes was the last of a dying breed. A fierce competitor known for never backing away from a fight, he pitched in four World Series over his 19-year career, and in 1964 was inducted into Baseball's Hall of Fame.

Grimes is also one of the few Wisconsin-born players to make it into the hall, and is one of the two most famous people to hail from the small Polk County town of Clear Lake, also the home of former governor Gaylord Nelson.

All of that gave a Chippewa Falls man plenty of rich history to mine, and Joe Niese has become the first author to chronicle the 270-game winner's journey through the game of baseball and life.

Niese's book, "Burleigh Grimes: Baseball's Last Legal Spitballer," became available to the public last week. It is the culmination of 2 1/2 years of work and research into the life of the Clear Lake native, who also lived in Holcombe for a time.

"He was one of those characters you hear about in early 20th century baseball," Niese said about Grimes. "He had a real attitude about it. On the field, he was a really bullish guy, but off the field he was really well liked."

Grimes pitched for seven teams between 1916-34, notching a 270-212 record with a 3.53 earned run average. He logged 4,180 innings during his career and threw at least 300 innings five times.

Major League Baseball tried to do away with all "trick" pitches during the 1920 season, including Grimes' specialty — the spitball.

In the 1920 World Series, Grimes' Brooklyn Dodgers matched up with the Cleveland Indians and another spitballer, Stan Coveleski.

"Having those two guys on the big stage kind of changed their minds about it, so at the end of the year the baseball minds met and allowed two pitchers from each team to throw it for the duration of their career," Niese said.

Grimes was one of 17 pitchers who were grandfathered in, and continued to throw the banned pitch until he retired after the 1934 season. He was the last active spitballer in the game.

In addition to playing a main role on a national stage, Grimes also has several connections to the Chippewa Valley.

The cantankerous hurler and his 1921 Brooklyn Dodgers teammates made a visit to play a series of exhibition games around Wisconsin, including Chippewa Falls. The Dodgers played a game against a team from Augusta at the Chippewa Falls Fair Grounds in October of that year.

After his career, Grimes lived in Holcombe for awhile, moving to a cabin on Lake Holcombe in 1970. He eventually moved back to Clear Lake, where he died in 1985.

Niese's interest in Grimes was piqued after reading Jerry Poling's book, "A Summer Up North," a chronicle of baseball legend Hank Aaron's time playing baseball in Eau Claire. Poling included a fair amount of information on Grimes, and Niese decided to write a book on the Hall of Famer.

"I've written a few articles on baseball stuff in the past and decided to go from there. It just snowballed into the idea to get a book," said Niese, who is the information services coordinator at the Chippewa Falls Public Library.

He used Retrosheet, a website with a deep history of full box scores from games dating back well into the last century, and his connections at the library to assemble a wide variety of information to help with his book.

"I'm not bashful about ordering things. I got into the triple digits of microfilm going back from Brooklyn to California, coast-to-coast with microfilm research," Niese said.

But it was his trip to Grimes' hometown of Clear Lake that paid the biggest dividends. There Niese was able to acquire photos and other information from Charles Clark, a good friend of Grimes, at the Clear Lake Historical Museum, a place that Niese said had a "mindblowing amount of artifacts."

Niese said Clark had scared off other authors looking to write about Grimes but that he and Clark hit it off immediately.

With a full-time job, wife and family, Niese had to make the best use of whatever time he had to work on his book. Sometimes that meant using a little free time at work to go through some material he had acquired.

"It helps that on my 15-minute break or my lunch I could sneak back to microfilm and work on that," Niese said. "That really shortened my research process."

Niese is a member of the Society for American Baseball Research and said he has already begun work on his next project, a book on another well-known former big leaguer and Boyceville native Andy Pafko.

"After I handed in that manuscript last July, I didn't know if I could do it again," Niese said. "A couple weeks later, I (thought) 'I've got to do something.'"

Niese is a self-admitted baseball guy. His brother, Chippewa River Baseball League secretary/treasurer Andy Niese, had a big impact on his love for the game. Niese played baseball at Eau Claire Regis and in the CRBL.

"Andy had me out in the backyard when I was 4, doing scoop drills at first base," Niese said. "He was a big driving force in

getting me interested in baseball.”

He received his first hard copy of the book last week, a memory he said will stick with him for a long time.

“It was pretty cool to open up that box and see it for the first time and be able to share that with my wife and kids,” Niese said.