

By John Quattrucci

East Bridgewater Star

*“May his leadership and fierce competitive spirit be an inspiration to the youth of Bridgewater”*

-Inscription on a plaque dedicated to Hall of Fame catcher and Bridgewater native Mickey Cochrane on the Bridgewater Town Common

On Oct. 20, 1931, in the town of Spavinaw, Okla., the oldest son of Lovell and Elvin ‘Mutt’ Mantle was born.

Elvin Mantle, a lead miner and fervent baseball fan, named his son ‘Mickey’, after his favorite ballplayer, Gordon Stanley ‘Mickey’ Cochrane, born in Bridgewater, April 6, 1903.

Twenty-two years later, Cochrane was on his way to establishing himself as one of the greatest catchers in baseball history as a member of Connie Mack’s Philadelphia A’s.

Cochrane won the American League MVP award in 1928 and helped the A’s to three straight American League pennants in 1929, 1930 and 1931 (winning the World Series in ’29 and ’30). Sold in 1933 to the Detroit Tigers, Cochrane became player/ manager, winning a second MVP award in 1934 while leading the Tigers to the pennant. The Tigers won another pennant under Cochrane in ’35 and defeated the Chicago Cubs in the World Series, 4 games to 2.

Cochrane, considered the fastest man to ever play the position, retired from baseball after the 1937 season and was elected to the Hall of Fame in 1947. His .320 lifetime batting average is still the all-time mark for a catcher. Along the way, Cochrane played with all-time greats Ty Cobb, Tris Speaker, Lefty Grove, Jimmy Foxx and Al Simmons in Philadelphia, Hank Greenberg and Charlie Gehringer in Detroit, and in retirement rubbed elbows with the likes of Babe Ruth, Maurice Chevalier, Fred Astair, Bob Hope and Joe E. Brown.

All that lay in the future on that fine spring morning in 1903. What of the boy who grew up on Pleasant Street in Bridgewater, spending his summers playing ball at South Field (now the site of the campus center at Bridgewater State College) and his winters skating at Carver’s Pond?

Mickey Cochrane was the fifth child of John and Sarah (Campbell) Cochrane. The Cochranes resided at 188 Union St. in Bridgewater until Mickey was five, when his father purchased a 16-acre farm about a half-mile from the Union Street house at 299 Pleasant St. (Rte. 104). Both houses remain standing today.

“Bridgewater was a nice, quiet town back then,” longtime Bridgewater resident Chet Wood said. “You knew everybody in town.”

“The place was much more rural back then,” added Charles Bevis, author of “Mickey Cochrane, The Life of a Baseball Hall of Fame Catcher.” “It was very much small-town America with small town values.”

Cochrane was less than enthusiastic about helping out around the family farm.

According to Beavis' book, Cochrane often said that when his father handed him a hoe to use in the potato patch, he would head to the field but then duck behind a stone wall.

"I'd get to that wall and throw the hoe away, grab my glove from inside my shirt and beat it down the road to town, Cochrane said. "Most of the time I'd get away with it. My older brother would do the hoeing. But once in a while he'd get tired of doing it all and tell on me. Then I'd get home and get a licking. I used to average about one licking a week."

"Daddy was not fond of tending our garden," Mickey's daughter Sara Bollman added. "He would work for a little while but quite often he would leave early to go play ball. Grandpa would chase him with a rake. They say that's where his speed came from."

Mickey would run down Mt. Prospect Street and through the center of town to play ball at South Field.

"That stretch of road at night was pitch dark and scary," Mickey would later recall. "Boy did that make me run like hell."

Cochrane often hunted in the woods and fields across the street from the house on Pleasant Street. This activity helped him become friendly with the neighboring Bohr family, particularly one of the daughters, Mary, who would one day become his wife.

"Mike used to borrow our hunting dogs and go hunting across Pleasant Street," Mary said, remembering her first meetings with Mike, who was two years older.

Cochrane entered Bridgewater High School in the fall of 1916. The building, now known as the "Academy Building," still stands at the head of town common in Bridgewater center.

"Most boys didn't go to high school back then," Charles Bevis said. "It was mainly girls who went off to high school. Boys would leave after the eighth grade to go to work in mills or factories. My father went to work in the Bridgewater shoe factories after eighth grade."

Cochrane went on to star in baseball, football, basketball and track while at BHS, though according to Beavis' book;

By his own admission, as well as the observation of others, Mickey was a much better football player, even a better basketball player, than he was a baseball player.

'I had experienced little trouble with football,' Mickey often said. "But baseball was sport of another order."

Cochrane's last high school game was a 6-0 Thanksgiving Day victory over Rockland in which Mickey scored the game's only points on a five-yard touchdown run.

For the basketball and baseball seasons of his senior year in high school, Mickey stepped up to a higher level of competition by playing for local amateur teams.

“He was too good for high school Charlie Bevis said. “Back when there was no TV or radio. Those semi-pro teams were the local entertainment, part of the fabric of the town.”

After games, Mary and Mickey often found themselves at a long time Bridgewater landmark, Hayes Ice Cream Parlor.

“We used to go to Hayes for ice cream after basketball games,” Mary Cochrane remembered of her early dates with Mickey; they and Charlie Hayes would discuss the outcome of the games. “When we weren’t at Hayes, we’d go for walks down Bedford Street or skate on Carver’s Pond.”

“They walked everywhere together,” Sara Bollman said. “They’d meet at the (Mt. Pleasant St.) cemetery and walk to school or to one of Mickey’s games. People said my mother was drop-dead gorgeous. When she walked down the street, heads turned.”

Carver’s Pond, about a mile down Grove Street off Bridgewater center, was the scene of Mickey’s off-field heroics.

In the winter of 1923, Cochrane saved the life of Frank Burrill, a youth who had fallen through the ice while skating near the ice house.

“Rescue Drowning Boy From Icy Waters at Bridgewater,” read the Enterprise headline. The story reported that “Cochrane crept onto the thin ice on his stomach, with others holding his legs and in this manner Burrill was reached and pulled onto firmer ice.”

Cochrane, along with 38 other seniors, graduated from Bridgewater High School June 21, 1920.

Mickey went off to Boston University that fall where he starred for four seasons on both the diamond and the gridiron.

Cochrane signed his first professional contract, with the Portland Beavers of the Pacific Coast League in September 1924 and one year later joined three future Hall of Famers, Jimmy Foxx, Al Simmons and Lefty Grove on the Philadelphia A’s.

Mickey and Mary had married in March 1924 and their first child, Gordon Jr., was born in 1925.

The Cochranes rented an apartment in Philadelphia during the season but returned to Bridgewater in the off-season.

No fitness gurus, personal trainers or steroids for Mickey. Cochrane stayed in shape chopping wood, *“leveling trees for \$3 dollars a cord in the forests of Bridgewater”* and keeping his batting eye sharp by trap shooting.

Following the 1927 season the Cochranes moved from Bridgewater to an apartment in Philadelphia.

Mickey’s trips back to his hometown would become more infrequent over the years.

There was a banquet at town hall for Cochrane and the A's prior to the 1929 World Series and a parade around the town common for Cochrane after the Tigers won the pennant in 1935.

"Mickey Cochrane, ace pilot of the pennant winning Detroit Tigers, came back to his home town last night and was accorded a conqueror's welcome by his fellow townsmen, who have watched with pride and enthusiasm his marvelous climb up the ladder of athletic fame," The Brockton Enterprise reported.

Starting at Trinity Church on Main Street, Cochrane rode in an open car around the town common to a testimonial dinner at Boyden Gym, now the site of the Arts Building at Bridgewater State College.

"It's not easy to get up here and talk tonight after such a demonstration," Cochrane said to the assembled crowd that night. "I played, went swimming and even had boyhood fights with some of you and those are days none of us ever forgets."

"I was 11 years old," remembered Chet Wood. "There was a huge crowd around the common that day. It seemed like the whole town was there. It was an exciting day for Bridgewater."

A lifetime Mason, Cochrane occasionally returned to Bridgewater for meetings at the local lodge.

One of Cochrane's final trips to Bridgewater was for the burial of his only son, private first class Gordon Cochrane Jr., who was killed in action in Europe in February 1945.

Gordon Stanley Cochrane died June 28, 1962 near his home in Lake Bluff, Ill.. As he wished, his body was cremated and the ashes scattered in a nearby cemetery."

The kid from Bridgewater had played in five World Series, won two MVP awards and was elected in a 1969 national fan poll as the greatest catcher of all-time. Mickey Cochrane had seen the world. For a while anyway, that world encompassed a few square miles of his hometown. A boy running away from chores, down Mt. Prospect Street, to go play ball.

The italicized portions of this story come with permission from "Mickey Cochrane, The Life of a Baseball Hall of Fame Catcher", 1998 McFarland & Company Inc. written by Bridgewater native Charles Bevis.