

the  
**Elks**  
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**Elks National Home:  
Retiring among Friends**

**A Place of Legends:  
Cooperstown, New York**

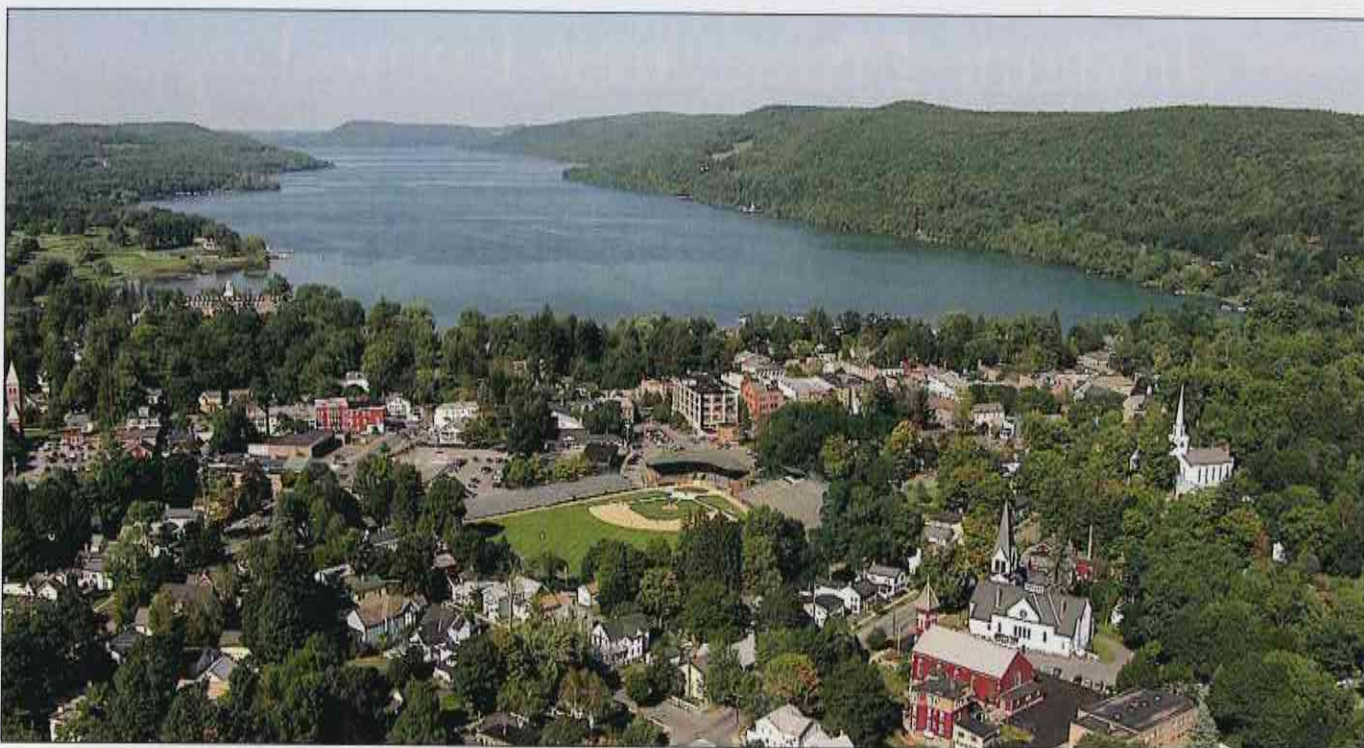


**Air Force One—The  
“Flying White House”**

**PLUS**

**Candidates for Grand Lodge Office  
A Word of Caution for Bond Investors**

**Girth and Gout:  
A Sweet Relationship**



▲ Nestled in the northern Catskill Mountains along the shores of Otsego Lake, Cooperstown, New York, has long been a place of legends and dreams, from James Fenimore Cooper's *Leather-Stocking Tales* to the birth of baseball and the Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum.

# A Place of Legends: Cooperstown, New York

Patricia Ann McNair

“**C**OME ON, Grandma. We’ve got to see every single thing!” The boy on the main staircase of the National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum said as he tugged on the hand of an elderly woman. He was ten, maybe eleven, years old, and she, dressed in jeans, sensible walking shoes, and a St. Louis Cardinals T-shirt and baseball cap, obligingly scurried up the stairs with her grandson. Granddad followed closely behind. The trio wore smiles and carried an air of determination: they were going to see every single thing.

At the National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum in Cooperstown, New York, an attempt to fulfill the task of seeing everything might be considered heroic in scope. The place is filled with an almost overwhelming number of treasures, collectibles, and bits of interesting information. This is not a collection of some hobbyist’s trinkets; what one finds here is serious (but fun) stuff, a plethora of baseball memorabilia and a collection of the stories and facts behind America’s favorite pastime.

Within the museum are more than

38,000 three-dimensional, baseball-related items, three million books and documents, and 500,000 photographs. The museum staff and curators sift and sort through these items (thousands more are donated annually) and provide visitors with rotating exhibits alongside the permanent ones. Each year museum visitors can see something new—and old.

## A Legendary Game

Cooperstown, a handsome village situated in the northern foothills of the Catskill Mountains and along the shore of sparkling, blue Otsego Lake, found its way into baseball legend in 1907 when a commission was charged with finding out how and where the game first began. After doing some research, the commission proclaimed that Abner Doubleday, a decorated officer from the Union army in the Civil War, invented baseball at Cooperstown. The principle evidence is said to be a letter from a friend who told of a game said to have been organized by Doubleday and played in Cooperstown in 1839. While there had been a number of other ball games played for some time before 1839, it was this particular game’s addition of

Dedicated in 1939, the National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum, in downtown Cooperstown, has grown to include a library and research facility as well as a museum. Each year, the pantheon of baseball greats increases with the induction of players into the Hall of Fame.

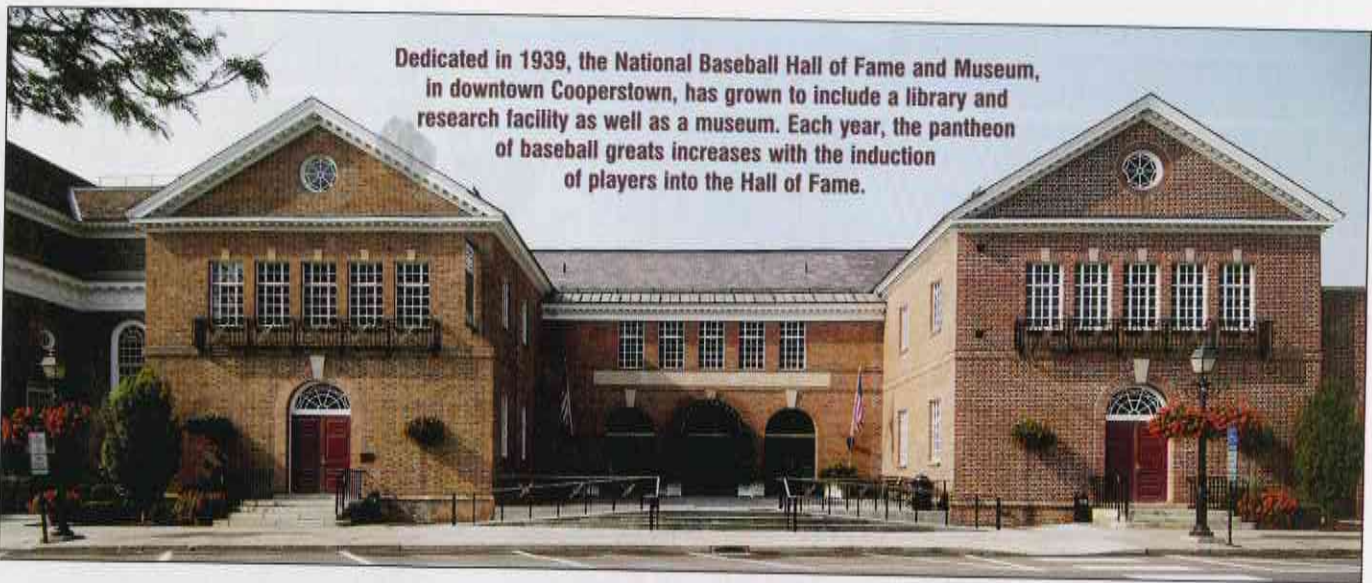


PHOTO: THISISCOOPERSTOWN.COM

rules—allegedly set by Doubleday and similar to those we know today—that led the commission to claim this event as the invention of baseball.

After years of considerably more research, it was discovered that Doubleday was a cadet at West Point at the time of the alleged game and that his family no longer lived in Cooperstown in 1839. Other documents and evidence have since debunked the “Doubleday Myth” even further. However, putting aside whether or not Doubleday invented the game and where the game was developed, Cooperstown remains an essential part of baseball culture. And to many of the town’s visitors, the National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum is a sort of mecca.

Sports fans are passionate about their games, and few games have as universal an appeal as baseball. Even in this day of superfast technology, shortening attention spans, and record-breaking athletics, the relatively leisurely pace of a game of baseball is still beloved by many. Perhaps this is because baseball is a game that can be (and is) played and enjoyed by

people of all ages and backgrounds, a game that can be improvised on a corner lot without much expensive equipment. The baseball game, whether it is a small-town Little League challenge or nine innings played by the pros in one of our country’s historic major league ballparks, is the perfect venue for a first date, a family outing, or a gathering of work friends alike. Numerous minor league teams have renovated and rebuilt their ballparks and are enjoying an increase in their ticket sales and fan bases, a tribute to

the continued popularity of the game. And baseball fans are some of the most loyal sports fans, whether their teams win or lose.

Guests who enter the museum’s rooms called the Babe Ruth Room, on the second floor, or the Hank Aaron Room: Chasing the Dream, on the third floor, find themselves surrounded by others moving slowly past the displays, reading every word posted, studying uniforms and letters and baseball paraphernalia in a sort of hushed awe. Ruth and Aaron are American icons. What athletic little

▶ **Baseball fans can look for their favorite players’ memorabilia, complete with photographs, in exhibits at the National Baseball Hall of Fame Museum.**

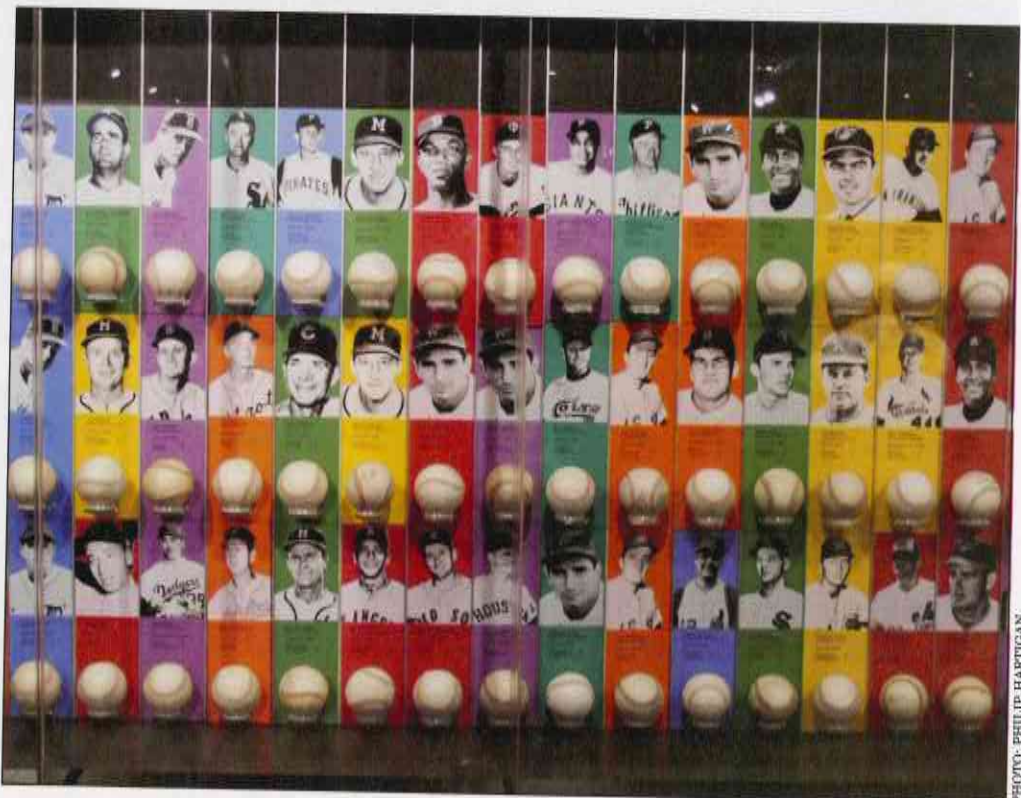


PHOTO: PHILIP HARTIGAN



▲ Exhibits in the National Baseball Hall of Fame include a full range of uniforms, baseball equipment, and paraphernalia—enough to engage the interest of visitors for hours.

## Cooperstown

boy, or little girl for that matter, hasn't imagined what it would be like to be so talented? The Hall of Fame Gallery gives even more credibility to the dream. When it comes to baseball, the men honored here have been there and done that.

"Ooh, Grandma, here's Whitey!" The same little boy from the staircase points to the plaque for Whitey Herzog, St. Louis Cardinals manager and 2010 inductee. The family stops to stare at Herzog's plaque for awhile, and then moves on.

"And Ozzie Smith," the grandfather says, pointing at another plaque.

"And Stan Musial," the grandmother sighs. "I used to have such a crush on him."

### Reflecting on History, Society, and Culture

Baseball is something more than just its players and managers. A timeline of the sport through the twentieth century runs along walls of the museum, highlighting various significant moments in history, culture, and society that ran parallel

to—and in some cases crossed paths with—significant moments in baseball. Diamond Dreams: Women in Baseball; Pride and Passion: The African American Baseball Experience; and ¡Viva Baseball! are informative and exhilarating exhibits; they explore the difficulties and successes of women ballplayers, African Americans players, and players from the Caribbean basin countries in a way that reflects a continued evolution of attitudes and social institutions. Here is a lesson not just in sport, but in culture and society.

This sort of multitiered lesson in culture and history is continued in other exhibits as well. Scribes and Mikemen, an exhibit honoring journalists and broadcasters; Baseball at the Movies, paying homage to the many cinematic re-creations of the sport and its stories; and Sacred Ground, an exhibit highlighting ballparks of the past and present, all reflect not only on important events in baseball but also on aspects of society throughout the years. In these exhibits, visitors can track changes in technology,

media, communications, architecture, celebrity, and stories told and revised. Daily programs such as Artifacts Spotlight and interactive exhibits in the Sandlot Kids' Clubhouse offer other opportunities for visitors to deepen their knowledge of baseball. The Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum's mission is to "preserve the sport's history, honor excellence within the game, and make a connection between the generations of people who enjoy baseball." The exhibits help make this mission a resounding success.

### Out of the Park

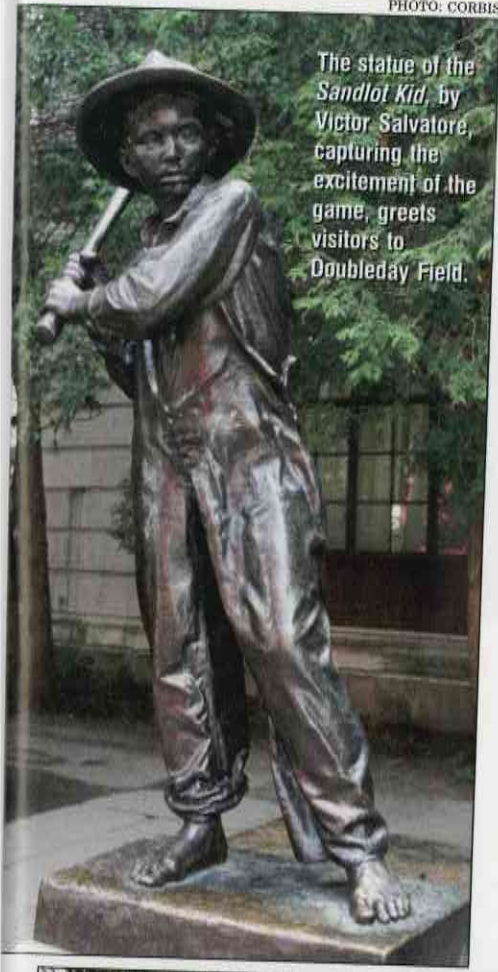
"I'm not really into baseball," a woman tells a friend. Their husbands and children have already climbed off the Cooperstown Trolley, and are headed toward Doubleday Field, the historic ballpark that was believed to be the birthplace of baseball.

"But you come here every year," the friend says.

"I don't come for the baseball," the woman says.

So what is Cooperstown if not just a

The statue of the Sandlot Kid, by Victor Salvatore, capturing the excitement of the game, greets visitors to Doubleday Field.



baseball town? That's a reasonable question that can be extensively answered: Cooperstown is a town for shopping, good restaurants, art galleries, comfy and historic inns and B&Bs; it is a place of festivals, car shows, horse shows, parades, museums, and markets. Cooperstown is a one-stoplight village in scenic Otsego County, a pleasant stopping point between Syracuse and Albany.

Travelers along one of the smaller highways from Albany come upon Otsego Lake almost unexpectedly. The rolling, wooded landscape opens up suddenly to the shimmering blueness of water, a serene setting further complemented by Cooperstown's many historic homes, buildings constructed in the 1800s and the early 1900s.

The village was settled in the late 1700s by Judge William Cooper, who was the father of James Fenimore Cooper, the author of the Leather-Stocking Tales, including *The Last of the Mohicans*. The town and its nearby lake attracted well-to-do settlers to the area, and Cooperstown was incorporated in 1812. Early on, the area was recognized for its rich and fertile

farmland; farmers of hops were particularly successful here.

A mile from the center of Cooperstown is the Farmers' Museum, a fine collection of buildings and artifacts that portray what life may have been like on the farm and in the village during the middle of the 1800s. Museum personnel in period costume tend the museum's livestock and mind the Middlefield Print Shop, Bump Tavern, and Todd's General Store. Horse-drawn carriages carry visitors around the grounds, the drivers offering tidbits of social, historical, and agricultural information. Here, too, are exhibits and replicas from a mid-nineteenth century county fair, including a midway tent and the Empire State Carousel.

Close by is a 1930s neo-Georgian mansion that is home to the Fenimore Art Museum. The museum holds fine collections of American and folk art and the Eugene and Clare Thaw Collection of American Indian Art.

The village of Cooperstown has an international reputation that is not solely a result of its connection to baseball. In this village, too, is the



▲ At Doubleday Field, the Boston Red Sox and the Detroit Tigers met for the 2005 Hall of Fame Game, which the Tigers won 6 to 4.

PHOTO: JILLIAN SLEWANT, JEL NATIONAL BASEBALL HALL OF FAME LIBRARY, COOPERSTOWN, NEW YORK



▲ The Farmers' Museum re-creates rural life in the 1800s, and old skills such as print-making and weaving are illustrated by museum personnel dressed in period clothing.

## Cooperstown

world-renowned Glimmerglass Opera (Otsego Lake was called "Glimmerglass Lake" by James Fenimore Cooper in his works), an opera venue of the highest caliber located in the most beautiful of settings. Matinee and evening performances run through July and August at the Alice Busch Opera Theater; the 2011 schedule includes *Carmen* and *Annie Get Your Gun*, as well as a new original libretto by Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright Tony Kushner.

### A Picnic and a Game

In some cases, Cooperstown might be considered the magnet that draws visitors to Otsego County—at least at first. Rightly so, perhaps; the village has its charms, conveniences, and diversions. While smallish (not many more than 2,000 year-round residents), the town boasts sophistication and elegance, as well as a hominess and laid-back attitude. But travelers to Cooperstown should explore the rest of the county as well; take to the roads that wind through Glimmerglass State Park, that run alongside "Glimmerglass" Otsego Lake, and that curl through the wooded foothills of the nearby mountains, passing through other villages along the way, among them, the tiny, picturesque Fly Creek.

A fine family outing can be had here, at the Fly Creek Cider Mill and Orchard. The 150-year-old water-powered cider mill is open for tours, and visitors can watch the journey of apple to cider, through a three-step process: wash, grind, and press. Industrialism from the 1880s and 1920s is paired with old-fashioned

ingenuity to produce some of the finest cider around. The Mill Store carries local cheeses, freshly made fudge, and chutneys and jams like grandmother used to make—all nice accompaniments to a cup of sweet, chilled, just-pressed cider. This place is a picnicker's paradise.

The picnic—another favorite



▲ The Alice Busch Theatre is the venue for the renowned Glimmerglass Opera, which offers summer performances of such major works as *Carmen*, *Medea*, and *Annie Get Your Gun*.



◀ At the Fly Creek Cider Mill, a museum, restaurant, and specialty food store, fresh apple cider tops off a rich culinary experience of farm-fresh foods.

American pastime—is one that is easily linked to a friendly game of baseball. The myth of Abner Doubleday's invention of baseball might not stand up to scrutiny today, but it is easy to imagine nonetheless. How might it have gone back in 1839? A group of friends gathers on a summer's day on an open field of Elihu

Phinney's farm (the very land that would become Doubleday Field). Some of the friends are still a bit dirty from their work in the hop crops; others have come out from the stifling parlors of their homes.

They share goodies from their picnic baskets; wives, sisters, and girlfriends pass around jars of apple

butter and hunks of fragrant cheeses. A bushel of apples is there for everyone. Someone has brought a ball. Someone else has a bat. They've played ball games here before, but in a casual way, a loosely structured series of physical movements—throwing, hitting, and catching.

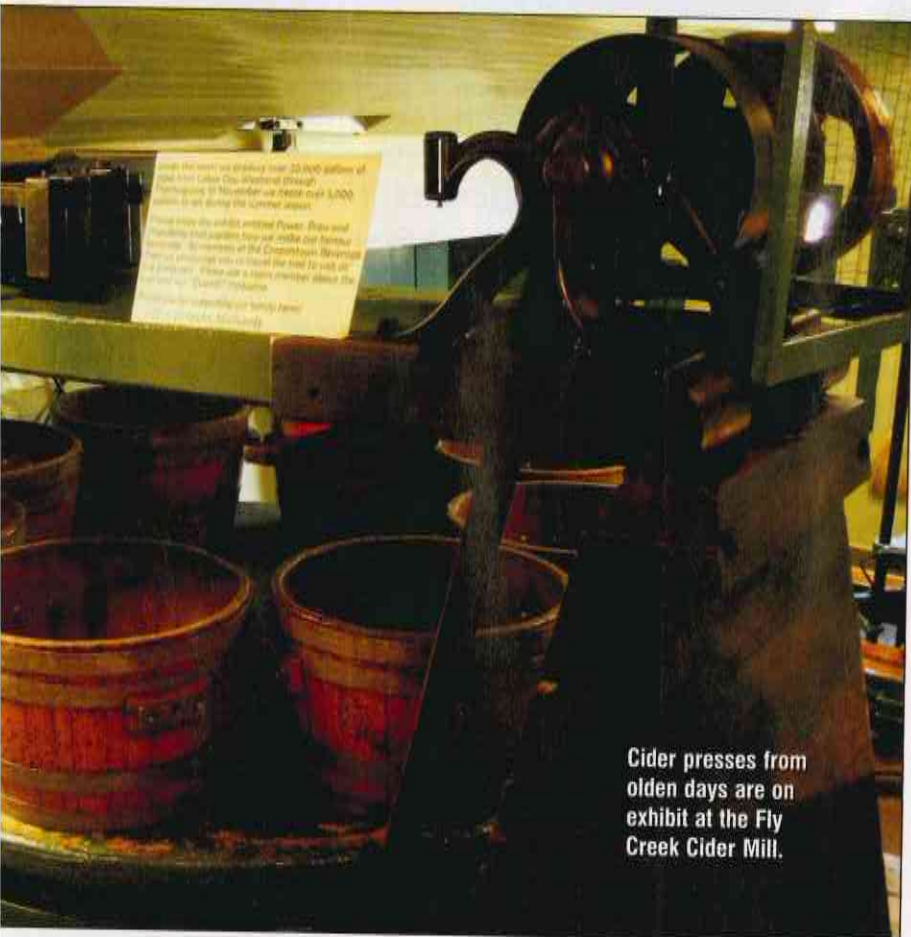
"Let's play a game," someone suggests, and the others agree, and get to their feet.

"All right, but I've been thinking." The speaker is twenty-year-old Abner Doubleday, home from his studies at West Point. "We need some rules."

He strokes his upper lip, where soon enough he will have a bushy mustache that he will sport for most of his adult life. He pulls a piece of paper from a pocket, spreads it out on a picnic blanket between the cider jug and a plate of dried meats and cheeses. His friends gather around.

"Here are the bases," he says, pointing at circles he's drawn around a diamond pattern. "This is where the pitcher stands," he taps a knuckle in the center of things. "And this," he says, looking up at the tilted faces of his friends and placing a finger on the tip of the diamond, "this is home."

And indeed it is, myth or truth, either way. This place in the foothills of the Catskills, on the banks of Lake Otsego, is baseball's home. Yes, Cooperstown is more than just this, but it is difficult, among the legends and artifacts and celebrations and evidence, to dispute this: Cooperstown is the home of baseball. ■



Cider presses from olden days are on exhibit at the Fly Creek Cider Mill.