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Hank Aaron

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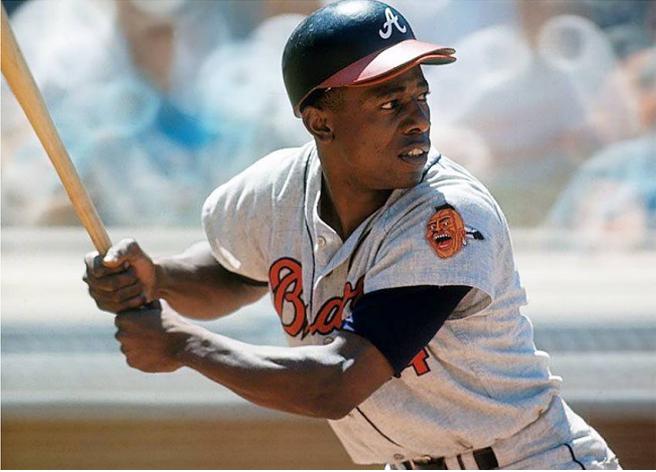
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Eric Gross received his PhD in History from Florida State University and is a former Associate Professor of History at Cascade College and Harding University. He, his wife Linda and son Connor currently reside in New Zealand, where Dr. Gross researches and writes as an independent scholar. He also creates educational and entertainment videos under the name Feral Lutheran Productions.



Hank Aaron at bat

IN MEMORIAM: HANK AARON

By Dr. Eric Gross

Growing up in the 1970's, the flow of time across the arc of childhood and adolescence played out like a song, with each year a measure in 2/4 time, with the rhythm marked by two great beats of the calendar's drum. The first, of course, was Christmas, the summer solstice of the kid year. The second followed roughly six months later, when my dad and I made our annual pilgrimage from Tallahassee, Florida, to Atlanta, Georgia, to watch the Atlanta Braves play a series against the Chicago Cubs. My dad, having come into this world and danced through his own song of youth on an Illinois prairie farm, was a lifelong Cubs fan; and I, of course, always rooted for the Braves. This yearly ritual was, and remains, the source of many of my fondest experiences with, and memories of, my father. Our first trip was in 1971, when I was nine; our last, after a break of three years rudely forced by the arrival of adulthood and its responsibilities, was in 1984.

In 1972 and 1973, Hank Aaron was closing in on Babe Ruth's homerun record. Every time Hank came to bat, the energy in the stadium suddenly and palpably changed. The crowd would clap, chant and stomp their feet in a building crescendo as he sauntered from the warm-up circle to the plate, and then, when he reached it and set into his stance, fall fell quiet with eerie swiftness. Expectation was as thick in the air as the Atlanta humidity. Every pitch was a catharsis; every swing a collective exhalation. Every line-riding foul ball soaring out to the far seats a rising exclamation followed by a deep diminuendo. Every mighty swing and a miss sent out a psychic ripple that seemed almost visible, hitting the crowd like a shockwave, knocking loose the held breath that one never realized they'd been restraining. Every ball called was a ratcheting up of the tension another notch; how much longer could the standoff go on? When would ball and bat meet, and what might follow that mighty crack? Sometimes, of course, Hank struck out. When he did,

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the crowd let out a deep and resonant "Awwww!", but then cheered him anyway. Sometimes, of course, he walked—often at the intentional choice of the pitcher, a tactic which drew a loud and long chorus of hoots and boos from the fans, and sometimes a clucking and bawking, chiding his lack of courage and aversion to risk. Sometimes, of course, Hank grounded out, or sent a long fly ball deep into the outfield, but not far enough; both cases produced an anti-climactic sigh as the accumulated tension released and the crowd reset itself for the next man at the plate.

Sometimes, of course, Aaron got one past the infielders, or between the outfielders, scoring a single or double or the rare triple; this elicited a barrage of cheers, but also came with a kind of enthusiastic disappointment -- no, nope, not this time. But maybe next. And then, of course, sometimes it was that next time, and Hank would unload all his might into a great, full, roundhouse swing, an uncoiling of the wound spring, the blurred arc of the bat and a sharp, rifle-shot impact. The ball would arch high, a tiny white blur against the green field and blue seats, outbound on a trajectory that sometimes seemed as if it would climb into the afternoon clouds or evening twilight, until it sailed out of sight. And then, the great ovation began; the glowing number on the electronic marquee would blink over and upwards another digit, and the distance to legend was now one less.

And so beat the rhythm of the year, one after the other. We were not at Atlanta-Fulton County Stadium at 9:07 PM on April 8, 1974, when Hank Aaron uncoiled on the second pitch from the Los Angeles' Dodgers legendary lefty Al Downing, and sent it 385 feet over the left field wall. But we were there through the virtual eye of television, and it is a moment I still remember.

History will remember Hank Aaron for a great many things, for the many records he made, the many he held and the many he still holds. It will remember Hank Aaron for his 23-year career, a career begun in the early years of the Civil Rights Movement, and played out during its greatest trials, tragedies and ultimate triumph, and a career whose ultimate moment was played out between the wild cheers and adoration

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of millions on one hand, and virulent letters full of racial hatred and multiple death threats on the other. History will remember Hank Aaron as his friends and teammates most remember him – a man of quiet, solid character and firm faith; humble, courageous, compassionate and full of good will. May history also remember him for his last public appearance, and a last, great display of his character, when on January 5th, 2021, he, along with several other accomplished and prominent African-Americans, received a COVID-19 vaccination in hopes of assuaging the fears of those in the black community concerning its safety.

History will rightly remember Hank Aaron for many things. I will forever remember him for those long-ago moments, suspended now in time by memory's golden amber, when the crowd hushed, the breath caught in the throat, and the world slowed to a stop in the instant between when a little white ball left one man's hand and fell within the arc of another man's bat, sixty feet and six inches away.

Thank you, Hank. I hope you're walking out of a cornfield somewhere in Iowa right about now, and onto your own field of dreams.