

# Recalling a New Pitch and a Strange Death

By NATE SCHWEBER

As the hitter gripped his bat and the pitcher began his wind-up, the catcher's voice rang out across the blades of Kelly green grass on Thursday morning under a baseball-perfect sky in Brooklyn.

"Strike them out, Creighton!" hollered silver-haired Mickey Tangel, 64, crouching behind the plate in a baggy cotton shirt with a 19th-century baseball logo.

But the man to whom Mr. Tangel referred, James Creighton, was not standing 60 feet 6 inches away. Instead, Creighton's remains were buried six feet below ground, beneath a marble monument at Green-Wood Cemetery.

Mr. Tangel and a half-dozen other 19th-century-baseball enthusiasts had gathered at the cemetery to commemorate the 150th anniversary of the death of Creighton, a man who scholars of baseball's nascent days say revolutionized the game.

"There's a good argument that Creighton changed the game more than Babe Ruth," Thomas W. Gilbert, an author and historian, said.

Creighton rose to fame in 1860 as a member of the Brooklyn Excelsiors, an amateur team, and was the first pitcher to throw something he called a "speedball," a term so antiquated it sounded quaint in the first verse of Bruce Springsteen's 1984 song "Glory Days." Today's hurlers call Creighton's innovation a "fastball."

"He was a pioneer," said John Thorn, the official historian for Major League Baseball. "There are people without whom the story of baseball cannot be told, and I think James Creighton is one of those players."

Despite the pitch that Creighton introduced, he is best known for his mysterious death. On Oct. 14, 1862, when he was just 21, Creighton played in his final game for the Excelsiors against the Unions of Morrisania. He died four days later in Brooklyn at his father's home on Henry Street, writhing in agony.

In 1862, a man named John Chapman played first base for the Excelsiors, replacing a man who joined the Confederate Army. In the 1890s, Mr. Chapman said that Creighton, in his final at-bat, swung so hard that he burst an internal organ but still



Creighton changed baseball by introducing the fastball.

## Enthusiasts of 19th-century baseball honor a pioneer in the sport.

cracked a home run. Almost immediately this Robert Redfordian myth became Mr. Chapman's legend.

No known record can verify Mr. Chapman's story, but historians like Mr. Gilbert and Mr. Thorn who have delved into Creighton's life believe that he probably had a chronic hernia that was exacerbated by his penchant for throwing around 300 pitches a game. Eventually it became infected.

At Green-Wood Cemetery, Eric Miklich demonstrated Creighton's windup and delivery, an underarm motion similar to fast-pitch softball. Twisting his hips, and possibly snapping his wrist in violation of the era's rules, Creighton was able to hurl early baseballs made of black leather at speeds of up to 85 miles per

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hour. Hitters were used to pitches that topped out at less than 50 miles per hour, Mr. Miklich said.

"It was the Creighton revolution," said Mr. Miklich, who plays on a 19th-century-rules baseball team. "It led directly to the creation of what we know today in baseball as the strike zone, and it destroyed the old game of baseball in which the pitcher only threw what the batter could hit."

On Saturday, Mr. Miklich will pitch in the Jim Creighton Festival, a doubleheader at the Smithtown Historical Society in Smithtown, N.Y.

Bob Johnson, 65, who suited up in an old-time shirt and cap for the ceremony on Thursday, is a member of the 19th Century Research Committee for the Society for American Baseball Research. He said understanding the roots of the way baseball is played today added to the enjoyment of the game.

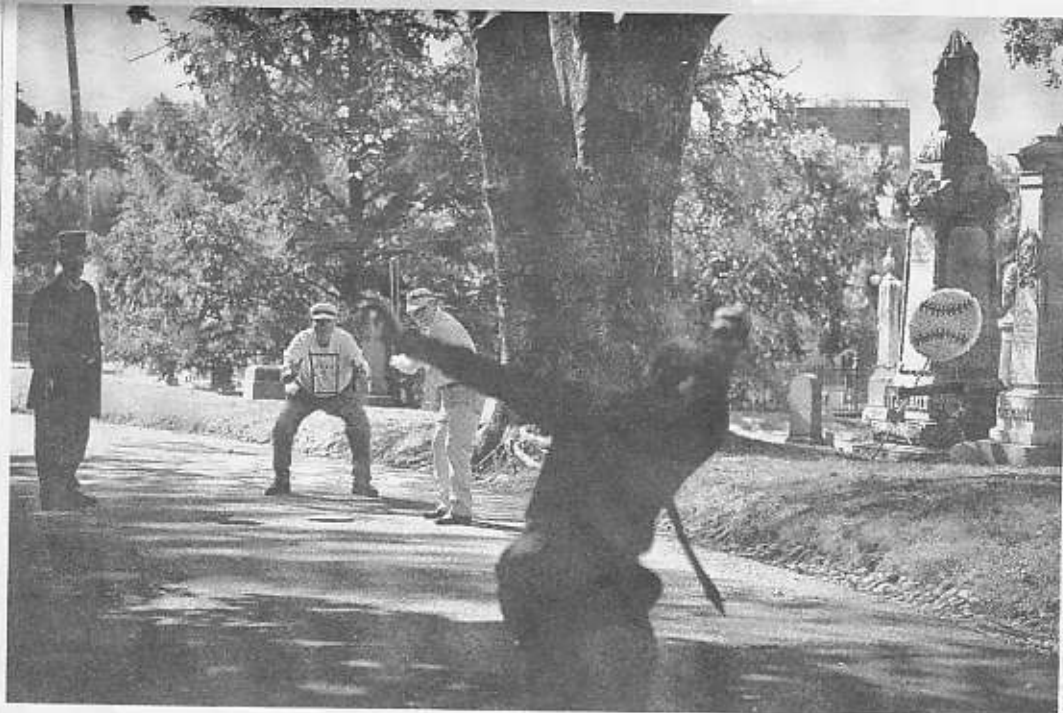
"The idea behind this day is to remind people where it all came from," Mr. Johnson said.

Craig Nordquist, 24, who works for MLB Network in Secaucus, N.J., traveled to Green-Wood Cemetery on his day off simply for an opportunity to learn about an early ballplayer.

"I've got a lot of curiosity about an era that even the best baseball minds don't know much about," he said. "There's so much mystery involved."

The gathering on Thursday was not the first at Creighton's grave, said Jeff Richman, the Green-Wood Cemetery historian. In 1866, players on the Washington Nationals team visited Creighton's final resting spot, on a hill underneath a London plane tree with a view of New York Bay. Each player clipped blades of grass to take as souvenirs, Mr. Richman said.

"It was a precursor to the idea of having a Hall of Fame," he said. "They came to his grave as a way of going on a pilgrimage to a place to honor a great baseball forebearer."



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Left to right, Ed Elmore, Mickey Tangel, Bob Johnson and Eric Miklich near James Creighton's grave, right, at Green-Wood Cemetery in Brooklyn on Thursday. Creighton died in 1862.