



VIEW FROM THE CROP: Clockwise from left, the Field of Dreams diamond and the Lansings' house, which doubled as Kevin Costner's in the movie; a Shoeless Joe snow globe; Barb and Olin Clayton seal their 29th anniversary with a kiss on right field. "People have spread their ashes out here. A lot of people have got engaged out here," says left-field owner Rita Ameskamp. "It's been sixteen years since the movie has been done, and I think being it's lived this long, it's going to go on forever."

A Diamond That's Forever



It's been 16 years since *Field of Dreams* made grown men weep into their baseball mitts. So what is that magic out there in the moonlight that keeps bringing people back to Iowa?

AFTER THE DEATH OF HER FIRST HUSBAND, BECKY DUBUISSON STARTED HAVING a recurring dream. In it, she was eating a hot dog and drinking root beer in the bleachers overlooking a baseball diamond in the cornfields. The time was midnight on New Year's Eve. The place was the Field of Dreams—the plot of land featured in the 1989 movie that has since become a tourist attraction, thanks to the two owners who have kept much of the original film set intact. Haunted by the vision, DuBuisson, who was living in Colorado at the time, knew what she had to do, though she didn't yet know why. With her aunt as her companion, she drove to Dyersville, Iowa, where she stopped to call Don Lansing—the single farmer who ran right field—to ask if she could visit. Never mind the odd hour or the snow piling up on the bases. Destiny had summoned her to Iowa, and when she arrived, DuBuisson found her

future. "I've been waiting for you," Lansing greeted her, a perfect stranger. The next year, on February 10, 1996, they married.

LIKE RAY LIOTTA'S SHOELESS JOE, WHO took a hiatus from heaven to play baseball in someone's backyard, *Field of Dreams* has been blessed with an afterlife so surreal you have to see it to believe it. Sixteen years following the movie's release, its audience continues to multiply at locustlike rates. In 2004, Universal sold almost one million copies of a two-disc anniversary edition DVD of the baseball classic. And every year, from April through November, approximately 65,000 people from around the world travel to Dyersville—a town previously best known for its National Farm Toy Museum—to play pickup games on the same field where Kevin Costner saw the ghosts of the shamed Chicago Black Sox.

"There are a handful of sacred places in the world: the Wailing Wall, the Blarney Stone. This is, in my opinion, one of those places," Becky Lansing (formerly DuBuisson) says, sitting in the shade of the white clapboard house that sheltered the Kinsella family (Costner, Amy Madigan, and a young Gaby Hoffman) in the film. It's late in July on a day

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so hot it could pop corn, but tourists are still arriving in droves, fulfilling what James Earl Jones famously predicted at the end of the movie: "People will come, Ray. They'll come to Iowa for reasons they can't even fathom."

My father, Terry Hauser, and I are two such people, though our inability to fathom our reason for being here stems from a lurking cynicism rather than spiritual befuddlement. From Chicago's O'Hare International Airport, where Dad and I meet (en route from Miami and New York, respectively), the drive is beautiful enough. Along the way, we pass Crayola-colored landscapes of red barns, green tractors, and light blue silos. Every once in a while, we spot a teenage boy selling sweet corn on the side of the road. But by the time we reach Dyersville, we stop counting cubes of hay and start ticking off motel chains and the number of times "family" and "restaurant" appear on the same billboard.

Off Route 136, we turn right at the pig farm, and here we are. We've never been the sort to go on a cruise or any kind of packaged vacation, but suddenly we find ourselves surrounded by gung-ho tour groups (mostly Japanese, although there is the occasional busload of spry senior citizens) wearing T-shirts that read "Is this heaven? No . . . it's Iowa" and "If you build it . . . they will come."

Adding to our suspicion of the place is the fact that in recent years the press has had a field day, so to speak, with the rift between the two landowners. While the Lansings want to maintain a modest operation, their former neighbor, a widow named Rita Ameskamp, threw a wrench in the wheel when she began leasing her part of the field to an investment group with plans to expand the site into a quasi-theme park. Neither party charges an admission fee; instead, they both accept donations and run competing gift shops. And just so the property lines don't blur, there are two separate driveways leading to the attraction: The Lansings' entrance is marked "Field of Dreams Movie Site," not to be confused with "Left and Center Field of Dreams." (Asked about her feud with the Lansings, Ameskamp, a soft-spoken and attractive older woman, frowns and says, "Well, that I'll never understand 'cause I've been a twin. I've learned to share. I don't even like the word 'feud.'")

The good news is, most visitors don't seem to care about the dispute, and after a while, neither do I. The catalyst for my mood change is Libby Schieffer, a grandmother of 19 who has driven up from Keokuk, Iowa,



PERFECT PITCHES: Above, clockwise from left, Lindsay, Madison, and Mackenzie Pfortmiller; Bob Bruce and Scooter from New York; a visitor at bat. Right, Two-disc DVD: \$24. Music box: \$12. Shot glass: \$5. *The Field of Dreams* experience: priceless.

for a family wedding party. Wearing a pink blouse, her hands folded coolly in her lap, she looks out of place sitting in the bleachers with a bunch of bikers in Lynyrd Skynyrd T-shirts. But she has a special reason for being at the Field of Dreams. Tucked in her purse is a photograph of her late father, taken circa 1910. "My dad was so proud of being a pitcher on a ball team," she says, admiring the young man in the pinstriped uniform as if he were one of her grandkids. "When I was born, he was hoping that I'd be a boy 'cause he wanted to teach me how to pitch. I only have one sister, and when she was born, he cried. But when I was eleven or twelve, Daddy made sure that he took me to see Babe Ruth. And I thought, 'I've got to bring my dad here.'"

With that, she smooths her pants and



waves to her relatives as she crosses the outfield. She hesitates for a moment at the edge of the grass, a rocky shore leading into an endless sea of corn, before sticking her hand between two sky-high rows—and when nothing happens, Libby Schieffer and her father walk right in.

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DON'T CALL THEM CORN FLAKES: (1) Becky and Don Lansing. (2) Rita Ameskamp, pictured outside her new home in the nearby town of Farley. "He called the day before my husband died to wish him well, which was very nice," says Ameskamp of Kevin Costner. (3 & 4) The competing souvenir stands. (5) The Lansings' friend Bob Pacanowski, a.k.a. Polish Rifle. (6) Bill Bokey from West Virginia came to the field via motor bike and trailer. (7) Milwaukee's Kevin Larsen may look tough, but chances are he's the perfect audience for a certain male weepie. Says producer Charles Gordon, "There's a couple of places in the movie where girls start crying. By the end, the men were always the last ones out of the theater. They didn't want anybody to see that they had teared up."



OVER THE YEARS, MY FATHER HAS developed a deft way of telling a baseball anecdote to the two people in the world who couldn't care less—my mother and me. He starts with a slow windup: "You remember Ty Cobb. We saw his plaque at the Hall of Fame in Cooperstown. . . ." Then he delivers the pitch: "He was nicknamed the Georgia Peach, but there was nothing sweet about him. Ty Cobb was the nastiest player who ever lived. He used to sharpen the spikes on his cleats so that when he stole bases, he'd tear holes in the other guy's flesh." Finally, sensing our waning interest, he makes the plea: "Okay, just stay with me here," he'll say, as if he were an ER doctor, and we two flatlining patients. "It's almost over."

Poor Dad. Since the beginning, the odds have been against him. He should have realized he was in trouble when on one of his first dates with my mother, a blond and blue-eyed Jew from New Jersey, she boasted about her connection to Hank Aaron. "He's my cousin," she said. "Your cousin?" Dad asked, perplexed. "Well, second cousin." "Are you sure? I mean, you do know he's black." Eventually, they figured out that she had meant Hank Greenberg, the Detroit Tigers

slugger who famously refused to play on Yom Kippur during the 1934 pennant race. (As a sidenote, my mother always has been bad with names. In 1994, she was the one who told me that the lead singer of Nirvana, Kurt Russell, had died.) When it comes to understanding baseball, I am my mother's daughter—which isn't to say that I haven't tried. For a while, my dad was bent on getting me to learn to love America's favorite pastime. (I don't know how else to explain the fact that I wrote my fifth-grade book reports on Sandy Koufax, Lou Gehrig, and Babe Ruth.) But some things just can't be taught: It must have been a letdown when I was booted off the girls' softball team, partly due to a habit I had of twirling every time I struck out. Fortunately, we had *Field of Dreams*. I was ten when my father took me to see it

at the theater—and I was entranced. What wasn't to love? Not only is it a fairy tale, but the smartest person in the whole movie is a little girl. (Ray's daughter has the bright idea to turn the field into a tourist attraction. Hmm. . . .) My dad shed a few tears over Burt Lancaster's portrayal of Moonlight Graham as an old doctor who travels back in time to get his chance at bat. Later that night, he showed me the real Archibald Wright "Moonlight" Graham's entry in the *Baseball Encyclopedia*—as a New York Giant, he only got to play one game in 1905—before telling me a bedtime story that ended with the refrain, "Say it ain't so, Joe."

Field of Dreams went on to gross an impressive \$64 million at the domestic box office, but according to Charles Gordon, who produced it with his brother, Lawrence (*The Warriors*, *Die Hard*), it's a tiny miracle that the film even got made. Although they had found the right man to adapt W.P. Kinsella's novel, *Shoeless Joe*—which was and still is one of writer-director Phil Alden Robinson's favorite books—convincing a studio to take on a male weepie with elements of magical realism proved a steeper challenge. "You go in and you say you want to do a movie about baseball, farming, and a guy hearing voices," Gordon says. "They think you're out of your mind. You can get thrown out for just one of those things, much less all three."

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The unexpected prize in this package turned out to be the father-son story, as sweet (though not as stale) as a piece of chewing gum inside a pack of Topps. "I know there were baseball historians when it first came out saying, 'What's going on?'" says Liotta, who batted right-handed and threw left-handed in the film, even though the actual Shoeless Joe Jackson did just the opposite. "But my response was, 'He didn't come back from the dead, either.' The movie was more about, 'Are you in touch with your loved ones?' 'Are you following your dreams?' 'Are you playing catch after a hard day's work?'"

I can answer yes to all of the above by the second day of our trip. It's been years since my father and I played catch in the firefly-laden field behind my elementary school; wearing my old glove, now a size

too small, I am reminded of how much I used to enjoy it. (I may throw like a girl, but I catch like one of those comatose patients in *Awakenings* with Robin Williams. It's that automatic.)

For the most part, we throw in silence. But every once in a while, Dad interrupts the flow to reminisce about losing the Dodgers to Los Angeles or to show me the difference between a curveball and a knuckleball. "You know what this is called?" he asks, catching the ball so that it's poised on the fingertips of his battered brown glove. "An ice cream cone." He laughs. "See, I thought you'd like that."

STAY THE DISTANCE: You never know if Shoeless Joe might step out from behind those stalks. . . .



IF BASEBALL IS A RELIGION, THEN THE Field of Dreams is the Holy Land. Over the years, it has been credited with inspiring reconciliations between estranged fathers and sons and reuniting families with the spirits of deceased relatives. It also has fostered lasting friendships, such as the one between the Lansings and Bob Pacanowski, a sporting goods sales manager from Chicago who has made 19 pilgrimages here, including one right after his father's death. "It hit me the hardest when the lights went on. You go back to that line in the movie: 'Dad, you want to have a catch?'" Pacanowski says. "My father played in the minor leagues. When he passed away, Don and Becky actually went out into the field, scooped up some dirt, and sent it to me. It arrived in a FedEx package before the service."

Ironically, the site's biggest skeptic is its creator. "I have to admit there's a part of me that wishes it was a cornfield again, only because the book and the movie were about the imagination," says Robinson. "Everybody's got their own interpretation, and that's the way it should be. But I think whatever catharsis people are getting from being there, they could get in their own backyard."

At least for me, it is the journey that makes the difference. All I had to do was ask, and my dad dropped a busy law schedule for a lark, shedding his suit for the "Who's a Bum?" Dodgers T-shirt that I bought for him last year at a Brooklyn fair. On the three-hour drive from Chicago to Dyersville, we didn't listen to the radio once: We were too busy talking about baseball. Granted, I zoned out a little during his explanation of the White Sox's nickname—the gist of it is that after throwing the 1919 World Series, they left a "black mark" on the team (the curse has since been lifted)—but in the process of trying to understand the game he loves so much, I have learned a lot about my father.

The realization that my dad is more open to new experiences than I had thought really hits home when we're invited to a crockpot "barbecue" at the Lansings' house—along with the Fellowship of Christian Men, of which Pacanowski is a key member. We'd gotten to know some of the other guys earlier out on the field. (In order of their appearance on the church e-mail roster, they are: Pastor Don "Missouri Masher" Niswonger, John "The Hammer" Stuart, "Studly" Steve Sakats, Tom "Sluggin'" Schlegel, Joe "Sticks" Schofield, Matt "Sweet Cheeks" Hambright, "Diggity" Don Froehling, Bill "Warning Track Power" Huber, and Ron "Stone Hands" Collins.) By dinnertime, despite Dad's distrust of religion in general and my total disinterest in sports, we're talking like old friends over bratwurst and beer.

Eventually Becky will go down to the basement to set up a row of sleeping bags and an inflatable mattress for the guys who have started to drift off. But first, standing in her QVC-stocked kitchen, she takes a moment to reflect on her good fortune. It's been 11 years since she followed a dream out to Dyersville. Next month, the Lansings will celebrate their tenth wedding anniversary. "I made Donny read *The Purpose Driven Life*," she says, referring to Rick Warren's popular self-help bible. "What goes around comes around. What you give to the universe, you get back. I was taught this since birth. And I see it daily at the Field of Dreams." ●