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By SPNW Staff



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BY DAVID ESKENAZI 08:30 AM 04/30/2013

# WAYBACK MACHINE: BEN CHENEY, A TACOMA ICON

Ben Cheney made his fortune in the lumber industry and spent the rest of his life donating to worthwhile causes, including the sponsorships of hundreds of amateur sports teams.



Timber baron and philanthropist Ben Cheney with his wife at Cheney Stadium in 1960, the year Tacoma joined the Pacific Coast League. / David Eskenazi Collection

By David Eskenazi and Steve Rudman

It's remarkable what one man can do when he puts his mind to something. In the case of Benjamin Bradbury Cheney (1905-71), what he accomplished was actually more awesome than remarkable given that he

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started his working life as a dirt-poor kid from South Bend, Pacific County, who had little going for him save his ingenuity and a desire to make a difference.

By all accounts, Cheney would have preferred to channel his energies into a career as an athlete, specifically as a baseball player. But he stood just 5-foot-8, needed a rock in his pocket to keep from blowing away in a strong wind, and flailed at even the slowest curve tossed in his direction. But for a man who couldn't wield a baseball bat effectively, Cheney sure knew what to do with a hunk of wood.

He became a timber baron and philanthropist who not only affected the lives of thousands of young Northwest athletes in a positive way, but — and it's not too far-fetched to say so — the lives of every American born after 1945.



Cheney, left, with former Seattle U. basketball star Johnny O'Brien, who played hoops with the Cheney Studs during the baseball offseason. This photo was taken in 1955, when O'Brien was also a member of the Pittsburgh Pirates. Note the Cheney Studs logo in the upper left. / David Eskenazi Collection


To cite just one of his many acts of largesse, if not for Cheney . . . well, let's run the numbers: During his lifetime, he backed 230 amateur sports teams that included 5,000+ players. The elite of these captured a combined 42 league championships, nine state and regional championships, and one national American Amateur Baseball Congress and four CSABA crowns. Without Cheney's willingness to crack open his wallet, none of this would be part of the Northwest's rich sporting lore.

All those titles and all those players performed,

at one level or another, under the collective banner of "The Cheney Studs," or "Cheney Seattle Studs," and sometimes the "Tacoma Studs." They were baseball, football, basketball, hockey and soccer teams, as well as bowling teams whose players ranged from nine years old to adults. The Cheney Studs included women, and were able to play because Cheney paid for their equipment, uniforms and travel — whatever the athletes required.


To cite a more specific example of Cheney's generosity: In 1959, five years after he began bankrolling his regionally prominent senior amateur baseball and basketball teams, Cheney supported five juvenile baseball teams in Tacoma, an adult team in Seattle and Pee Wee teams in Greenville and Arcata, CA., where the Cheney Lumber Co. operated mills. Cheney also supported four Tacoma football leagues that included Rookie, Pee Wee, Bantam and Midget teams.

Cheney's most elite athletes, 16- to 22-year-old young men, came from


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Northwest colleges and high schools and played in Seattle's top amateur leagues, which were a big deal in a city years away from hosting major league sports. Cheney's aim: Give interested athletes an opportunity to develop their skills so that they might have a chance to advance to the professional ranks.

Why Cheney engaged in such robust philanthropy stemmed from his experiences as a youth. Born March, 24, 1905, in Lima, Beaver Head County, MT., Cheney at age nine moved to South Bend, famous for its oysters and alive with sawmills.

His mother, Martha Kidd Cheney, just died in a Pocatello, ID., hospital and his father, John, had opted to remain in Montana after he quickly remarried. Young Ben Cheney and his sister, Lulu, grew up on Willapa Harbor in utter poverty, reared by their grandparents, Benjamin Franklin and Rebecca Cheney, who moved to South Bend to open a photography studio.

As a young man (probably 11), Cheney came into contact with a juvenile baseball program operated by Father Victor Couvorette, a Catholic priest who sponsored South Bend's entire teenage team. Father Couvorette purchased uniforms and equipment for the boys and even provided streetcar fare to get them to their games in nearby Raymond.

Father Couvorette encouraged Cheney's love of baseball and all sports, and Cheney eventually played football, basketball and baseball at South Bend High for two years before quitting prematurely so he could "get on with my life." Determining that South Bend held no future for him, Cheney borrowed money so that he could make his way to Tacoma, where he went to work for lumber companies and tried his hand at baseball in one of Tacoma's commercial leagues.

"I only got to play because I could catch and throw, and I always showed up," Cheney told The Seattle Times. "Until I was almost 30, I kept trying to make contact with a breaking pitch. It wasn't any use."

As Crow's Lumber Digest noted in a July 30, 1959 article on Cheney, his early lumber experience occurred in South Bend, where, during summer months, he worked as a whistlepunk (a lumberjack who operates a signal wire running to a donkey engine whistle) and helped load cars for Columbia Box & Lumber, among other companies.

Once in Tacoma, Cheney, "too poor to buy a streetcar token," according to the Pacific County Historical Society, scraped together enough money from odd jobs to pay his tuition at Knapp Business College. After nine



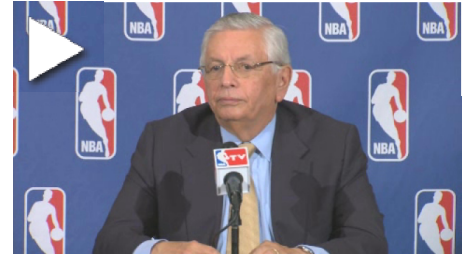
Cheney, who launched the Cheney Studs in 1954, with George Kritsonis, who played several years with the club. Kritsonis was a member of the original Studs in 1954 and also played on the national championship team in 1960. / David Eskenazi Collection



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Cheney, second from left, was instrumental in Tacoma joining the Pacific Coast League in 1960. From left to right, Seattle Rainiers icon Fred Hutchinson, former major league pitcher Rosy Ryan, former Stadium High coach John Heinrich and Pacific Coast League president Dewey Soriano in 1962. / David Eskenazi Collection

months there, he went to work as a 19-year-old stenographer at the Dempsey Lumber Co. for \$85 per month.

After receiving a basic education in the business, Cheney joined the Fairhurst Lumber Co. in 1929, primarily as a wholesaler. In that capacity, Cheney worked for many small mills from northern California to the Canadian border.

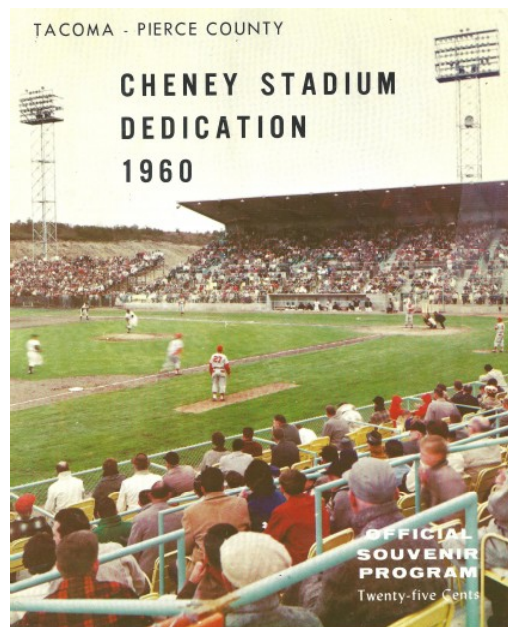
“An early practice was to purchase small tracts of timber, some for as little as 50 cents per thousand, and then turn the logs over to small mills for cutting,” noted Crow’s Lumber Digest. “From this, Cheney eventually became

the biggest individual supplier of ties to the continental railroads. He began shipping ties to England, South America and China. It was while he was cutting railroad ties that he got an idea.”

By May of 1936, with the country wallowing in the Great Depression, Cheney saved \$14,000 and quit Fairhurst to start his own company. But it was not successful, the initial Cheney Lumber Co. losing \$111.86 in its first two months and \$511.96 in its first year. Cheney sought loans to keep his business afloat, but in a collective decision they would later regret, all of Tacoma’s banks turned him down.

“Times were changing,” The Tacoma Historical Society wrote of this period. “It was becoming more difficult to obtain cheaply the small tracts of timber in which Ben and his tie producers set up their portable mills, and the sidecut slab wastage was enormous, often two-thirds of the log.

“What to do with the slabs baffled Cheney. Broom handles? No. Fence posts? No. Lath? No. Toothpicks? Of course not. The solution came to Ben in the middle of the night: Why not supply the



The Pacific Coast League admitted Tacoma in 1960 after Ben Cheney led a furious, 42-day effort to complete



housing market with standard eight-foot (wall) studding, the same length railroad ties were cut. Many ceilings then were eight and a half feet, and builders were taking any length stud they could get, often 10 or 12 feet. The waste was enormous.

construction of a stadium, named after Cheney. This is the program cover from the dedication game. / David Eskenazi Collection

"After that, Ben couldn't sleep for thinking of the whole thing. He bought a squarehead Berlin planer from an old mill at Mukilteo for \$200, and traded the scrap from another mill for an edger. Thus was born the first Cheney stud mill at National, WA., near Eatonville."

In the lumber trade, Cheney's eight-foot pieces had long been called "shorts." A skilled marketer, Cheney conceived of a new logo that he ultimately stamped on each stud, using the silhouette of a Belgian stud horse he had seen at the Puyallup Fair. Cheney also had all of his two-by-four ends painted red for identification purposes. Thus was born the Cheney Stud.

"The new product soon established the standard room height in residential construction throughout the United States," explained the Tacoma Historical Society. "It put to use an enormous amount of formerly wasted timber, incidentally saving American homeowners uncounted millions of dollars in heating expense by reducing the height of their ceilings."



This is an interior page from the Tacoma Giants' dedication game program in 1960, when the franchise was admitted to the PCL. Cheney is in the circle at the bottom right. / David Eskenazi Collection

The first boatload of Cheney Studs departed Willapa Harbor in 1945. By 1959, Cheney's mills, located throughout Washington, Oregon and California in such diverse ports as Tacoma, Medford OR., at Myrtle Point near Coos Bay OR., Central Point OR., Arcata, Potosi and Greenville CA., were processing 100 million board feet of timber per year. In each of the towns in which he conducted business, Cheney sponsored amateur sports teams.

At the urging of curmudgeonly youth coach Joe Budnick, Cheney began sponsoring senior amateur baseball and basketball

teams in 1954, outfitting his "Cheney Studs," previously known as the "Rainier Hi-Stars," with uniforms and equipment and paying meal, travel and hotel expenses.

Budnick, once a three-sport star at O'Dea High School who played football briefly at the University of Washington and dabbled in basketball at Seattle University, recruited the players, drawing many from Northwest colleges and several each year from local high schools.

The baseball Studs played in Seattle's City Amateur League and enjoyed an immediate burst of success after Cheney began his sponsorship. The 1954 Studs won both the city and state amateur championships, captured a regional tournament in Watertown, SD., and played in the American Amateur Baseball Congress national tournament in 1954 in Battle Creek, MI.

The Studs returned to Battle Creek in 1955 and placed second. After another second-place finish in 1959, the Studs, with Budnick still managing, won the championship in 1960. The story of the win prompted big headlines in Tacoma and Seattle newspapers.

Many who donned Studs flannels played professionally after "graduating" from the organization, and several spent time in the major leagues, most notably Tacoma's Ron Cey, who had a 17-year career with the Los Angeles Dodgers and Chicago Cubs and made six National League All-Star teams.



The 1960 Tacoma Giants. Notable players include Juan Marichal, fourth from right, back row, among players; Dusty Rhodes, sixth from right, back row among players; Ben Cheney, middle row, far right; Matty Alou, front row, third from right. / David Eskenazi Collection

More recently, in 2004, Tim Lincecum, now with the San Francisco Giants, and then a University of Washington student, spent a summer with the Studs (won two games in the amateur World Series).

Cheney not only sponsored sports teams, he backed a number of sports-related spinoff groups such as the Cheney Stud Courteers, a basketball troupe which for a number of years entertained crowds at high school and college basketball games with Harlem Globetrotter-style halftime shows. The Courteers, 12 to 15 years old, once performed during a Seattle SuperSonics game.

In 1959, a year after the Brooklyn Dodgers and New York Giants relocated to the West Coast, Cheney learned that a small stake in the Giants was up for sale and wasted no time buying it. Within months, Cheney discovered that an even larger block of stock was available due to the fact that New York socialite Joan Whitney Payson had to dispose of her holdings so that she could purchase an interest in the expansion

New York Mets.

Cheney bought Payson's stock and suddenly owned 11 percent of the Giants franchise, making him the club's second-largest stockholder behind Horace Stoneham.

As an owner and board member, Cheney learned that the Giants were looking for a new location for their AAA team, then playing in a seedy facility in Phoenix. The Giants wanted the team relocated by 1960 and Cheney proposed Tacoma, the only problem being that Tacoma did not have a AAA ballpark.

At Cheney's urging, the City of Tacoma and Pierce County came up with \$900,000 to construct a stadium and Cheney offered to cover \$100,000 in cost overruns, figuring there would be overruns. Sure enough, there were, about \$100,000 worth. But the major challenge was that the facility had to be built quickly.

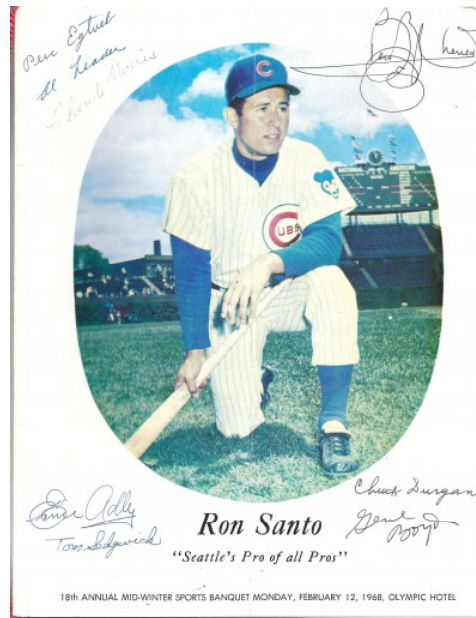
Construction began in January 1960 and was completed in 42 working days, an astounding feat overseen by Cheney, and the main reason why the stadium was named in his honor. The successful rush to build enabled Tacoma to join the Pacific Coast League in 1960. A year later, the Tacoma Giants won the PCL pennant, and Cheney Stadium has since hosted the Tacoma Twins, Cubs, Yankees, Tugs, Timbers, Tigers and now the AAA Rainiers.

A grinning, life-size bronze statue of Cheney, complete with scorecard and peanuts, occupies a front row seat – Row 1, Section K — in the grandstand at Cheney Stadium at 2502 S. Tyler St.

Cheney won numerous awards during his lifetime, including induction into the Tacoma-Pierce County Sports Hall of Fame in 1968. But he never lived to see his statue in his namesake ballpark, nor did he live long enough to experience his induction into the **State of Washington Sports Hall of Fame** in 2004.

Cheney's heart gave out Tuesday, May 18, 1971, in his 66<sup>th</sup> year. But it pumped generosity right to the end, and beyond. Just a few months before his death, Cheney was instrumental in making possible a trip by Tacoma's Wilson High School to Honolulu to play a Thanksgiving Day football game.

Weeks following his death, one of his soccer teams, the Cheney Stud Hustlers, traveled to England for a series of exhibition matches. Cheney footed the bill.



Ron Santo, a Franklin High graduate and member of the Chicago Cubs, received a salute at the annual Mid-Winter Sports Banquet Feb. 12, 1968. This is the program from that event, with Ben Cheney's autograph in the upper right-hand corner. / David Eskenazi Collection





Spring Training Camp  
El Centro, California

March 23, 1959

Mr. Ben Cheney,  
Cheney Lumber Company,  
405 Tacoma Building,  
Seattle, Washington.

Dear Ben:

Due to my heavy work load of organization duties, I did not have the opportunity to write and thank you for your renewal order for season box tickets which I now hasten to do.

Every effort is being made to put together an interesting ball club and we will do our best to give you an entertaining season.

With best wishes,

Sincerely,

*Fred Hutchinson*  
FREDERICK C. HUTCHINSON  
General Manager-Manager

FCH/ST

*Hope everything is going along  
well Ben, anything we may  
be of help to you in the  
summer don't hesitate to ask.*

This is a letter from Seattle Rainiers' GM and manager Fred Hutchinson to Cheney, thanking Cheney for renewing his season tickets. The note at the bottom is a personal message from Hutchinson to Cheney. / David Eskenazi Collection

Five years before Cheney brought the Giants to Tacoma, he quietly established the Ben Cheney Foundation, a charity aimed at encouraging growth and prosperity in the logging communities where the Cheney Lumber Co. was active, including Tacoma, southwestern Washington, southwestern Oregon, and portions of Del Norte, Humboldt, Lassen, Shasta, Siskiyou and Trinity counties in California.

In other words, Cheney's generosity outlived him. When the Cheney Lumber Co. was sold to Louisiana Pacific, an additional \$10 million went to his foundation.

"Men with Cheney's dedication to helping others don't come around too often," Earl Luebker of the News Tribune wrote after Cheney's death. "Tacoma is a much better place for his having passed through here."


"At least where Ben is now," added Times columnist Hy Zimmerman, "there are no curve balls."

*The Cheney Studs will celebrate their 60<sup>th</sup> reunion Sunday, May 19 from 2-7 p.m. at the McGavick Conference Center on the Clover Park Tech College campus in Lakewood, WA. The event is open to the public. A \$45 ticket includes dinner, a Cheney Studs cap and a 60-page program. For more information, go to [www.OLDTIMERBASEBALL.COM](http://www.OLDTIMERBASEBALL.COM) and download a registration flyer from the home page.*


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