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## Baseball's past has uncertain future

### Finger's exit leaves Houston museum in limbo

By DAVID BARRON Copyright 2009 Houston Chronicle  
April 20, 2009, 12:07AM

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Gary Fountain For the Chronicle  
A plaque marking home plate at Buff Stadium remains at the now-closed Houston baseball museum.

Home plate at Buff Stadium — more accurately, a plaque marking the site of home plate at Buff Stadium — remains affixed to the floor of what used to be Finger Furniture's mammoth Gulf Freeway showroom just south of downtown Houston.

The store itself, built in the 1960s on the site of what had been Houston's minor league ballpark since 1928, is silent and empty in the wake of the Finger family's decision to exit the furniture business.

There's no one inside to check out the giant ballpark mural, shot 81 Opening Days ago, or the empty display cases in a rear alcove that used to house Houston's only baseball museum, a pet project of family patriarch Sammy Finger.

Sammy Finger's collection — 1,500 to 2,000 items, including autographed balls, magazine covers, bats, equipment, a piece of the Buff Stadium façade, the western-style road uniforms worn by the original Houston Colt .45s — is accounted for, catalogued and stored in a warehouse.

But for the moment, no one is prepared to step to the plate to declare if, or when or where, the old Finger museum, or a successor, will once again entertain visitors.

Rodney Finger, the heir to the family business, "cannot comment on the status of the museum at this time," spokesman Bernard Kaplan said in an e-mail. "Hopefully we will be able to announce something in the coming weeks."

Until then, the remnants of Buff Stadium remains as much in limbo as its successor, the Astrodome, as 21st century Houston ponders what to do with its memories of times and teams long gone.

#### Couches and collectibles

Like Buff Stadium itself, the Finger museum was a unique part of Houston's sports history, reflecting the peculiar affection of a town for its teams and its players, from Dizzy Dean through Lance Berkman, and for visiting luminaries like Mickey Mantle and Whitey Ford.

"It was part of the excitement and history of Houston baseball," said Tom Kennedy, a former editor and writer for the Houston Post who is the most recent curator of the Finger collection. "I loved the disc from Buff Stadium and all the autographed balls and things that pertained to the Buffs and to the transition from the Buffs to the Colts."

Despite the quality of the material, the museum's location was always an imperfect compromise. It was a smart business decision in its early days, when fans would flock to the store for autograph sessions featuring members of the Colt .45s or Astros or visiting players, but as those who had memories of the Buffs and the Colt .45s dwindled, it became primarily a way for customers to pass the time while waiting to complete finance or delivery arrangements.

"It was so far off the beaten track," said Houston baseball historian Bill McCurdy. "There would be young couples there. I was an unofficial curator and would be explaining things, and they wouldn't care. They were there to buy a couch."

Some collectors, including Jo Russell, the widow of the late Buffs executive Allen Russell, reclaimed their items before the museum shut down. However, at least one well-loved fixture of the collection remains unaccounted for.

As recently as 1994, the Finger museum included a statue of former Rice baseball coach Dickie Kerr, the Chicago White Sox pitcher who won two games in the 1919 World Series while his teammates were conspiring to throw the Series to the Cincinnati Reds. Today, the statue's whereabouts are unknown.


#### An Astros alliance

Kennedy hopes the collection has a future.

"I'd like to bring it back to where the spotlight was early (Houston) baseball," he said. "That was the common denominator that ran through the history of the museum."

If that's the case, perhaps one option would be an alliance with the Astros, who in recent years have taken steps

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to take charge of their own memorabilia as they approach their 10th season this year at Minute Maid Park and, in 2011, their 50th season as a National League franchise.

Pam Gardner, the team's president for business affairs, said the team has hired a staff member to catalog the team's inventory of historic items for display and, in some cases, for public sale.

"We've been more careful to hold on to the iconic items since (owner Drayton McLane) has bought the team," Gardner said. "When he first came in (in 1992), we lamented that we didn't have a great history. But we now have a rich history, and it's one that deserves to be preserved, which is why we have added a position to encompass that."

One example fans will notice this year, Gardner said, are blown-up copies of the annual team photos, from 1962 through 2008, that will line the walls of the stadium's club level.

### Hall of Fame idea

While this is hardly the time for blue-sky, big-picture developments, Gardner would like to see a separate building either on the Minute Maid Park grounds or nearby for an Astros hall of fame that could include artifacts from the Texas Baseball Hall of Fame.

"It would be a great thing to do if we can work together to raise the money," Gardner said. "This is not exactly a great time to get that going, but it certainly is in everyone's mind that we would like to get something like that."

Team historian Mike Acosta, a former Astros Buddy during the days of the team's program for young fans, also manages the Astros Authentics program, which will offer game-used bats, balls, caps, lineup cards and other equipment, at prices he said will begin at \$2 to \$3 and range up to \$75 to \$100.

He knows, too, that the clock is ticking toward the 50th anniversary season.

"I want to have something in place that will honor the players, the teams and the ballparks, something that Houston fans will consider very special," Acosta said.

"Even if we can't build a separate structure, we can bring these items and try to fit them into spaces that aren't being used to their full potential."

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The history and heritage of baseball in Houston didnot begin in 1962 with the inception of the Houston Colt .45's/Astros.

Here are two examples:

At one time back in the 1920's-30's the majority of major league spring training ites were found in Texas and in Houston.

Where was the first night game played between two major league teams? Wrong. It was not in Cincinnati in 1938.

It occurred in 1934 at Buff Stadium. An exhibition night game under the lights took place in an exhibition game between the Chicago White Sox and New York Yankees.


That is why is still mystifies me that the city of Houston still does not have a museum dedicated to the history of baseball in this city. Baseball has much more of a colorful and longer history in Houston than football. Football doesn't even come close.

4/21/2009 12:13:56 PM


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**seenital** wrote:  
I was worried about the baseball museum myself. If I could afford the cost, I would buy it and move it of where the fans could enjoy the history again. I always enjoyed going to see the Fingers' museum and marvel at the collection.  
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The Astros and the Finger family should work together on this. There is plenty of room in the hall on the Crawford street side of Minute Maid to erect a worth while display.  
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