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MILWAUKEE ----When it comes to summer getaways, retired Milwaukee postal clerk John Franzen doesn't have far to go. As of opening day 2001, Franzen has seen 2,613 baseball games in Milwaukee.

And just like the price of stamps, the number keeps growing.

Franzen's passion includes a string of 1,090 consecutive home games from May 1973 until the end of the 1986 season. (Franzen, 65, spent the 1987 season on the disabled list with a heart problem.) And people think I'm in a rut because I return to Key West every winter.

I found Franzen during the inaugural night of the resplendent \$400 million Miller Park. He sat behind home plate in the front row of the Loge diamond boxes, where Franzen paid \$25 a game for a full season ticket.

He sat alone, but he was among friends.

Franzen wore a dark blue Milwaukee Brewers jacket and a matching Brewers ball cap with a rust-colored bill. A weathered black briefcase rested at his feet. It was filled with baseball magazines, clippings, a Brewers media guide, grapes he brought from home and a spiral-bound scorebook where Franzen chronicles every game he sees. He has a lot of scorebooks. Old scorebooks roll like scrolls out of the closet in Franzen's Milwaukee apartment.

President Bush was at Miller Park to throw out the first pitch. That guy who carries the "football" with the nuclear launch codes was somewhere in the house. This briefcase is Franzen's "football."

As you may have guessed by now, Franzen is not married. He does not have children. At the Brewers' previous County Stadium home, Franzen occupied the same seat, eight rows behind home plate, for 28 seasons.

Since the Brewers entered the National League a couple of years ago, more Chicagoans are making the trip to Milwaukee to watch the Cubs play them. And the Brewers expect to draw more than 3 million fans to the new park. (The Cubs are in Milwaukee May 8-10 and June 1-3; I'd check out that series, especially with Cub fan Jimmy Buffett down the road for a June 2 gig at Alpine Valley; call the Brewers ticket office at 414-902-4000.)

The games will not be rained out. Miller Park is the only fan-shaped retractable roof ballpark in North America.

To underscore the notion that Milwaukee is the biggest small town in America (pop. 610,700), most of the opening night sellout crowd of 42,000 hung around for about 20 minutes after the game. They watched the roof open while "2001: A Space Odyssey Theme" and "The Skater's Waltz" played over the public address system.

My friend Chris is a huge baseball fan. However, she shocked me by looking upward and remarking, "This is just like the Sydney Opera House!"

Franzen added, "County Stadium had a lot of memories. I saw Robin Yount's 3,000th hit. And going back to the (Milwaukee) Braves I saw Harvey Haddix pitch those 13 innings_er, 12 innings_of perfect ball, only to lose in the 13th (1-0 to the Pittsburgh Pirates on May 26, 1959). But I like this (park) because we don't have to sit in the cold and rain. Now I don't have to wear my parka and long underwear."

I had a hot one on my hands. Who else but Franzen would be better to talk about pre- and post-game Milwaukee? "Well, before the game, for dinner I'd go to Mader's, (the 99-year-old restaurant is downtown at 1037 N. Old World 3rd St.; 414-271-3377)," Franzen said. "I like their weinerschnitzel. It's actually breaded veal. It's a great German dish. And I'm German. I don't eat at the game, but I have tried a hamburger here. It was a nice, big size. I paid \$5.50 for it, about the same price at

County Stadium.

"I don't go out much after the game, but when they clinched the (American League) pennant in 1982, I celebrated at Ray Jackson's on Blue Mound Avenue. It's no longer there."

I suggested the 4th Base, 5117 W. National Ave. (414-647-8509), a half a mile southwest of Miller Park. This is one of the best baseball bars/restaurants in America. After a 1992 old-timers game at County Stadium, Joe DiMaggio, Ted Williams and Mickey Mantle came to the 4th Base for dinner. Brewer great Robin Yount still stops by the 4th Base whenever he is in town. (Here's another road secret: There's an affordable Best Western Woodview Inn, 5501 W. National Ave. (414-671-6400) within walking distance of 4th Base.)

The 4th Base has been in its present location since 1985. From 1978 to 1985 it was underneath an on-ramp to the expressway in a blighted area called "Pigsville." That's why an otherwise inexplicable 400-pound cement pink pig with a painted Brewers uniform sits by the 4th Base pay phone.

You are . . . where?

Many baseball fans confuse the 4th Base with the 711 Club, a corner bar down the street that was run for more than 30 years by Brewer manager Harvey Kuenn and his family. The former Cubs catcher led the Brewers to the 1982 World Series. That team was affectionately known as "Harvey's Wallbangers."

Kuenn died in 1988 of hardening of the arteries. He was 57. His right leg was amputated just below the knee in 1980 after a blood clot cut circulation. His artificial leg hangs above the 4th Base bar. It proudly wears a Brewers' pant stirrup. I am not making this up.

"I was in Harvey Kuenn's," Franzen said. "I knew Harvey and (his wife) Audrey. I've never been in the 4th Base." Several years ago, WSCR-AM radio personality Mike Murphy jogged my memory about the 4th Base.

Murphy, 49, is an original Wrigley Field Bleacher Bum and a road warrior. Although we didn't know each other at the time, Murphy and I hit the 711 Club during the Brewers' 1982 World Series season. And to this day, we still think we were at the 4th Base. (The 711 Club has since closed.)

"Back toward where the bathrooms are there is a back room," Murphy said. "That used to be Harvey's bedroom. He didn't have a door. It was like Carbondale (where Murphy was a hippie college student). He had a tapestry sheet, you'd push it aside and there was Harvey with a bunch of people. You could walk back and talk to the manager of the Milwaukee Brewers."

Franzen doesn't know what he is missing with 4th Base. It has some of the finest food in Milwaukee. Check out the deli case, which features choice cut meats and seafood. The 4th Base is known for its Cajun shrimp (\$3 apiece), made with a Caribbean/Sicilian recipe concocted by 4th Base owner Peter Papara. Murphy suggested, "Pick out about three or four scallops, some shrimp, broccoli, and you have that over the linguini with red sauce (\$18)."

The 4th Base has a Chicago flavor. The bar area features an autographed copy of the Bears' "Super Bowl Shuffle" record, and a faded 1973 Ernie Banks poster hangs near the men's room. And be sure to check out the original Milwaukee Braves uniform, donated by Johnny Logan, who still comes around the tavern.

Yet, the 4th Base memorabilia has nothing on Franzen's memories.

"I followed the original Brewers, which was a minor league team," Franzen said. "This was after Bill Veeck had the team (in 1941). In '53 the Braves moved to Milwaukee (from Boston) and I was in high school. I bought my first season ticket in 1956. I've had a season ticket ever since." Franzen has had a season ticket as long as I've been alive. That's a long time.

Franzen enjoys the clear sightlines at Miller Park and there are some interesting extras. Miller Park doesn't have the individualistic architectural characteristics I've seen in the new ballparks of Denver, San Francisco and Seattle. Instead, it carries a basic, functional Midwestern feel that's twice as nice as Comiskey Park. The field's natural grass is a blend of three types of Kentucky bluegrass, which is grown at the same Peotone, Ill., farm that provides the grass for beautiful Wrigley Field.

Miller Park features several murals depicting Milwaukee baseball history and scenes of Wisconsin industry and tourism, but they aren't as colorful and dramatic as the murals of Jacobs Field in Cleveland. The outside of the stadium is graced with seven-foot-tall, 900-pound bronze statues of Brewer Hall of Famers Hank Aaron and Robin Yount. Milwaukee baseball history is honored with concession stands like the County Stadium

Grille and Borchert Field Grille. And ex-Brewers Gorman's (Thomas) Corner and the tailgating (Jim) Gantner's Garden have moved over from County Stadium.

As for real important updates, mascot Bernie Brewer has relocated to Miller Park, although the alcohol angle of his shtick has been removed. Come on. This ballpark is named after a beer company. At County Stadium, Bernie "lived" in an Eastern European chalet in center field and wore lederhosen. Whenever the Brewers hit a home run, he slid into a big mug of beer.

Now Bernie "lives" in a slick dugout down the left field line and is dressed in a nondescript baseball uniform. After a Brewer's bomb, Bernie spins down a twisting tubular slide which resembles something you would see at a water park. He looks more like Bernie Beach Boy.

Franzen liked everything about Miller Park_except the new Bernie. "I miss the old Bernie," he said. "And there used to be two Bernies. One wandered the stands and the other was up in the chalet. Now they only have one up in that dugout."

Besides the Buff Bernie, another low point in Franzen's baseball life was between 1966 and 1970 when Milwaukee was without pro baseball. Franzen was photographed at the final home game of the Milwaukee Braves in September 1965 before they left for Atlanta. "I was on the front page of the Milwaukee Journal," he lamented. "There's a picture of me leaning on the railing holding a baseball. The caption below it read, 'I just feel blue.' "

So what did Franzen do?

"I joined the Navy," he answered. "I was a radio man. I spent two years in Iceland. The only thing I saw were softball games from the barracks. I got out of the Navy in 1970 and missed the first three games of the season (when the Seattle Pilots relocated to Milwaukee.)

Despite his devotion to his Brewers, Franzen still finds time to travel. "I go to Arizona every spring," he said. "I spend five weeks watching the Brewers at spring training."