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James Kinley Skipper, Jr., 1934-1993

James Kinley Skipper, Jr., an internationally renowned professor of sociology, died of cancer at his home in Burtonsville, Maryland on February 15, 1993 at the age of 58. Known as Skip, he moved to Maryland in March of 1992 where he finished writing his last book, *Baseball Nicknames: A Dictionary of Origins and Meanings*. The publication of this book culminated a twelve year research project. *Baseball Nicknames* was a long-time professional goal of Skip's which brought together two of his most passionate interests: nicknames and baseball. In the preface of the book he wrote:

I am a sociologist and a rabid baseball fan. In July of 1979 I read an article by Stan Grosshandler, "Where Have Those Grand Ole Nicknames Gone?" It appeared in the 1978 edition of the *Baseball Research Journal*, a publication of the Society for American Baseball Research. The gist of the article was that over time the number of major league players with nicknames had declined and the ones assigned in recent years lacked the color of those in the past. While Grosshandler provided some examples in support of his argument, the three page article was hardly a comprehensive study. I was aware that from time to time other writers had made the same point, but none had any hard evidence to back up their hypothesis. As a

50 Names 41.1 (March 1993)

baseball fan I wanted to know if this hypothesis could be supported, and if so, as a sociologist I wanted to know why.

During his research Skip reported to have read over 3,500 books, articles and newspaper accounts pertaining to baseball players' nicknames. He made three trips to the National Baseball Library at Cooperstown, New York, where he drew information from 4,350 players' files. In addition, he sent mail-back questionnaires to 467 living former players, inquiring about their nicknames. *Baseball Nicknames*, published by McFarland and Company, contains the nicknames of over 3,600 players, umpires, managers, owners, broadcasters, writers, executives and other officials, and fans. Each entry provides the given name of the individual, nickname, position, years played (or years associated with the game for the non-players), and origin of the nickname. For many years, this was Skip's labor of love; his excitement for this research never flagged. In 1989 he discovered the origin of a nickname that had long eluded him. As a rookie for Pittsburgh in 1909, John "Dots" Miller was working out before a game in Honus Wagner's place at shortstop. While Wagner watched from the dugout, a newspaper reporter asked Wagner who the new kid was. Wagner, in his rather thick German accent, replied, "Dats Milla." When the rookie's name came out in print the next day, a nickname was born. Reporters decided to have some fun with Wagner's accent and "Dats Milla" was transposed into "Dots" Miller – a nickname that stayed with Miller for life. When Skip discovered the origin of this nickname he displayed an exuberance commensurate with the passion of a true scholar.

Besides his love for onomastics, Skip was a researcher and prolific writer in the sociological specialties of Medical Sociology, Deviant Behavior, and Popular Culture. He was author or co-author of twelve books, ten monographs, and more than 350 articles and reviews published in books, journals and other publications. He reviewed more than 100 jazz records and compact discs for the journal *Popular Music and Society*. Skip directed seven Ph.D. dissertations and fifteen masters theses; he served on more than seventy thesis or dissertation committees. He held many positions in professional organizations, including:

President, AKD-International Sociology Honor Society, President, Mid-South Sociological Association, Chair, Publications Committee, Southern Sociological Society, Ex-Officio Member, American Sociological Association, and various positions in the American Name Society.

Skip held numerous research and consulting positions; he served as editor for *Sociological Inquiry*, and contributing editor for *Popular Culture in Libraries*, *Popular Music and Society*, *Quarterly Journal of Ideology*, *Sociological Spectrum*, *Sociological Symposium*, *Journal of Popular Culture*, *Society*, and *Names*. He was a guest co-editor of *Names*, volume 38, number 4, December, 1990. In that volume he also co-authored the paper "Toward a Theory of Nicknames: A Case for Socio-Onomastics."

Skip will always be remembered as the father of socio-onomastics. Among his other famous socio-onomastic publications are: "Nicknames, Folk Heroes and Assimilation: Black League Baseball Players, 1894-1950," *Journal of Sport Behavior* 8 (1985):100-114, "Nicknames, Folk Heroes and Jazz Musicians," *Popular Music and Society* 10 (1985):51-62, "Nicknames of Notorious American Twentieth Century Deviants: The Decline of the Folk Hero Syndrome," *Deviant Behavior* 6 (1985):99-114, "Placenames Used as Nicknames: A Study of Major League Baseball Players," *Names* 38 (1990):1-20, "Public Nicknames of Famous Football Players and Coaches: A Socio-Historical Analysis and Comparison," *Sociological Spectrum* 9 (1989):103-123, "The Sociological Significance of Nicknames: The Case of Baseball Players," *Journal of Sport Behavior* 7 (1984):28-38, "Nicknames and Blues Singers. Part I: Frequency of Use, 1890-1977," *Popular Music and Society*, 12 (1988):37-48, "Nicknames and Blues Singers. Part II: Classification and Analysis," *Popular Music and Society*, 13 (1989):29-43, "Women, Nicknames and Blues Singers," *Names* 36 (1988):193-202, "A Teaching Technique Revisited: Family Names, Nicknames, and Social Class," *Teaching Sociology* 18 (1990):209-214, "Baseball's 'Babes' – Ruth and Others," *Baseball Research Journal* 13 (1984):24-26, and "Nicknames, Coal Miners and Group Solidarity," *Names* 34 (1986):134-145.

From 1986 to 1992, Skip was Professor of Sociology at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, where he also served

52 Names 41.1 (March 1993)

as department head and director of the sociology graduate program. He also held appointments at Yale University (1963-1965), Case Western Reserve University (1965-1970), University of Western Ontario (1970-72), Medical College of Ohio at Toledo (1972-1976), University of Hawaii (1968 and 1976), University of Toledo and Bowling Green State University (1972-1976), the University of Victoria-Canada (1978), and Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University (1976-1986). Skip was always very proud of the fact that he became a full professor by the time he was 35 years old. Skip received many honors in his life including the Mosby Book Award, the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University Certificate of Teaching Excellence, the AKD International Sociology Honor Society Lifetime Achievement Award, and the Mid-South Sociological Association Lifetime Achievement Award.

Skip was born on September 14, 1934 at Ohio State University in Columbus, Ohio. He always considered himself a true "Buckeye" because of his birthplace. He grew up in Oak Park, Illinois, a suburb of Chicago. He graduated from Northern Illinois University (magna cum laude) in 1956 with a Bachelor of Science degree in Education. He received a master's degree (1960) and a Ph.D. (1964) in Sociology from Northwestern University. Survivors include his sons James K. Skipper, III and John F. Skipper, and his daughter-in-law Laurie M. Skipper, all of Burtonsville, Maryland. He is also survived by his brothers Thomas L. Skipper of Oak Park, Illinois and John C. Skipper of Mason City, Iowa.

A memorial service was held for Skip on Saturday, February 20, 1993 at the Virginia Tech Memorial Chapel in Blacksburg, Virginia. A reception honoring Skip immediately followed the service at Jamerson Athletic Center. Donations in remembrance of Skip may be sent to the James Kinley Skipper, Jr. Memorial Scholarship Fund, Alpha Kappa Delta, International Honor Society, Alvin P. Short, Secretary-Treasurer AKD, Department of Sociology, Southwest Texas State University, 601 University Drive, San Marcos, Texas, 78666-4616.

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