
INTRODUCTION



“Baseball in America and America in Baseball” was selected as the topic for the 2006 Walter Prescott Webb Memorial Lectures, one of the notable traditions of the academic calendar. For those of us who have been part of the growth in the field of Sport History and the subfield of baseball history, the choice is both inspired and highly gratifying. Those chosen for this singular honor as lecturers are representative of the best scholarship devoted to the proposition that the history of the national pastime can illuminate the history of America in valuable and unique ways.

The writing of baseball history goes back into the nineteenth century with the likes of Henry Chadwick and Albert Spalding, but the writing of baseball history as an academic discipline is more recent. The two great pioneers in the field were David Voigt and Harold Seymour, whose multivolume histories of the game were among the first baseball histories to be regarded as serious academic endeavors. They were also, to my knowledge, the first baseball histories to be reviewed in the professional history journals.

Since then there has been an explosion of academic material published on the history of the national pastime in books and in articles in the leading history journals. In addition there are several journals devoted to sport history and to the history of baseball. By the middle of the 1990s, many job applications in the field of American History carried academic presentations and publications dealing with baseball or sport history as part of the professional vita. Only a scant few history departments still withhold recognition of the legitimacy of baseball history and sport history as part of the academic enterprise.

Baseball history has gone through an internal explosion and development. General histories of the game are still produced, but more and more research has focused on particular aspects of the game. The history of the business side of baseball has become a minor growth industry. These efforts take the form of large economic histories and franchise histories, and include the dynamics of the economic interaction between teams and communities. Serious biography examines the role of the hero and illuminates issues of

class, race, and values. The intersection of baseball and politics is another rich area being examined.

Larger issues of race have attracted considerable scholarly attention from baseball historians. Baseball is studied as a window on culture and values and as a transmitter of ideals, as well as a means of acculturation for immigrants. The relationship between the growth of baseball and the growth and development of all forms of media goes back into the nineteenth century with the emergence of a sporting press. In the twentieth century, radio, television, film, and the information transformation have all impacted the game.

In point of fact, all the great forces that have shaped the American experience have also shaped baseball from the local sandlots to the modern stadiums. All the great forces that shape the human experience and the development of human personality impact baseball, and vice versa. Baseball is often a mirror or symptom illuminating the larger society, and on occasion it becomes an agent for change.

◆ This volume, resulting from the 2006 Walter Prescott Webb Memorial Lectures, is a collection of six essays offering a window on the variety and quality of baseball history being produced within the halls of academe. They represent the work of three generations of baseball historians. Each brings a unique perspective to the game; each focuses on a different but equally important aspect of baseball history; each represents the high quality of historical research and writing that has become the hallmark of the field.

In his contribution to this volume, David Vaught cites the now too often quoted line from Jacques Barzun, “Whoever wants to know the heart and mind of America had better learn baseball.” However, Vaught points out that if you read on to the end of the sentence Barzun offers further direction: “and do it by watching first some high school and small town teams.” Historians have until recently paid scant attention to the latter part of Barzun’s advice. In this collection, David Vaught, Sam Regalado, and Dan Nathan offer essays that redress that shortcoming.

David Vaught’s “‘Our Players Are Mostly Farmers’: Baseball in Rural California, 1850 to 1890” takes us into California’s Central Valley where the towns of Davisville and Dixon developed a strong baseball rivalry. Vaught addresses several questions: Were the players mostly farmers? How rural were these towns? Why did baseball become popular at this time and place? Why have historians, both baseball historians and rural historians, missed this phenomenon, which was such an important aspect of community life?

Vaught, as both a baseball and agricultural historian, is particularly well equipped to seek answers to these questions. He makes use of a wide variety of materials and paints a fascinating picture of life in rural California in the second half of the nineteenth century. The changing economic and demographic conditions of the time and place, the natural disasters that hit these communities, and the daily round of life, including the patterns of recreation, are among the details that Vaught explicates in this gem of an essay. There is also a short examination of the evolution of the game at this grass roots level, including the impact of separate visits to the region by Alexander Cartwright and the Cincinnati Red Stockings.

Vaught concludes with a call for more histories of baseball at the local and the nonprofessional level. He calls on his fellow historians of rural life to reexamine their assumptions about baseball and its role in the lives of people on farms and small towns across America.

Samuel Regalado, in “‘Invisible Baseball’: Japanese Americans and Their Game in the 1930s,” offers another slice of baseball history at the local and regional level. Regalado, too, focuses on the nonprofessional game. What he gives us here is an examination of the Japanese American community through the lens of baseball, and this community’s interaction and lack thereof with the larger American community. Geographically he concentrates on California although he does venture into the communities of the Northwest.

Regalado’s primary interest is in the Nisei generation who came of age in the years of the Great Depression and who faced massive discrimination in California and throughout the West. The Nisei were isolated from the larger community and were frustrated by the desire of the Issei that the Nisei serve as a bridge between cultures. As with their Euro-American contemporaries competition was a central value and sport was one means to instill that value.

The Japanese Americans operated in a sporting tradition conveyed through athletic clubs, and Regalado examines that tradition in America. Baseball was an integral part of the sporting culture that the Issei brought to the United States, and for them it was a significant part of their community recreational life. However, it failed to offer a bridge to the larger American community.

Faced with discrimination, the Japanese Americans, as so many others have done, turned inward. Baseball was played in isolation, and the larger community took little notice. Japanese American baseball had a golden age

in the 1930s but remained largely invisible to the outside world. This is a fascinating story well told, and in the end there is little mystery as to why Regalado opens his essay by quoting from Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*.

Indeed the African American community had its baseball communities and leagues that were just as invisible as that of the Japanese. Dan Nathan, in "Chasing Shadows: The Baltimore Black Sox and the Perils of History," relates the history of one such invisible team that in 1929 won the first and only pennant in the American Negro League.

Little is known or remembered of these talented representatives of the city of Baltimore. By 1933, the Black Sox franchise was out of business and few now recall them or their achievements. As Ellison says, and anyone who has ever compared the white and black press knows, African Americans were nearly totally invisible to the white society. It is as if the black press and white press in the same city were reporting on activities on two different planets.

In this thoughtful essay, Dan Nathan not only attempts to piece together the story of the 1929 Black Sox, but he also raises significant questions about memory and history. What is it that individuals choose to remember? What is it that society chooses to remember? Who decides what will be remembered and how it will be remembered? On what basis are these decisions made? For historians, these are central and troubling questions, especially if as a historian you are trying to write a history of one of those invisible groups.

Speculation on these questions and other matters leads Nathan across many fields, baseball and otherwise, and across a century or more of baseball history. He takes us through the 1929 season with the Baltimore Black Sox and, in the end, offers a panoramic view of the Sox and their contemporaries. Nathan places the team within the community and shows the centrality of Negro League baseball to the isolated African American communities.

Last but not least, Nathan returns to the questions of memory and history. He examines how historians work their way around and through the historical evidence and the gaps in that evidence, patching and filling, to finally produce what has sometimes been called a "useable past." Nathan's trip through memory is also a trip through his own personal past showing how one historian is moved toward a topic through a myriad of influences in his own history.

These three essays form one pod in this collection. The other three are more discrete entities, and although they could be tied together, such a connection would be forced and serve no purpose.

Steven Riess, in "The Profits of Major League Baseball, 1900 to 1956," tackles another kind of baseball history and one that defies all historians

who are wedded to hard and accurate evidence. What Riess attempts to do is make a reasonably accurate assessment of the profitability of baseball in the first half of the twentieth century. The difficulty of the task is due largely to the fact that most baseball owners have treated the hard data of profit and loss as a state secret.

Riess ferrets out the facts of profitability and seeks to explain the factors that contribute to it. These factors include the size of the city; the quality of the ballpark; the presence or absence of Sunday baseball; and the quality of the team, which often correlates with salaries. Riess analyses value, selling price, and the comparative economic return on investment. He charts the ancillary income from other ventures such as stadium rental to Negro League teams. The analysis is broken down by decade and by league.

The essay is rich in information and analysis, it offers important insights, and it is written with clarity. Riess knows the questions to ask and the angles to pursue, including what owners were doing with some of their profits. There are also a few surprises along the way.

In the end, the most impressive achievement of this essay is the painstaking research required to gather and verify the data and to make certain that the data are comparable across the spectrum of major league baseball. Once that is accomplished, Riess is able to draw meaningful and important comparisons between teams, leagues, and circumstances. He deftly shows what can be done with some dogged and creative research, and the rewards that can be reaped from simple hard work. This is a model for historical research and writing.

Mark Dyreson's "Mapping an Empire of Baseball: American Visions of National Pastimes and Global Influence, 1919 to 1941" offers yet another example of the insights into American history to be gained from baseball history. This essay is based heavily upon research done in the records of the U.S. Department of Commerce. As well as explaining the symbolism of the game for Americans, Dyreson clearly demonstrates why baseball people believed the game was a significant force in promoting American economic expansion around the globe.

The years between World Wars I and II are often characterized as a period of "isolationism" in the United States. To a great extent this was a popular myth focusing only on public opinion polls and selected political rhetoric. The fact of the matter is these decades were a period of considerable global expansion for American business and economic influence.

What Mark Dyreson has done in his contribution to the Webb Lectures is lay out one small part of the American economic expansion as tied to base-

ball and to the sporting goods industry. It is fairly well known that American sport accompanied American military forces and American missionaries as they pushed America's imperial destiny across the planet. What is not so well known is the way in which the U.S. government promoted American commerce globally in the interwar period; and what is even less known is the role sport, baseball, and the sporting goods industry played in that process.

To paraphrase Yogi Berra, you can learn a lot by just looking, and that has never been any better demonstrated than by Steven Riess and Mark Dyreson in these two excellent pieces of historical research.

If the history of baseball can illuminate the history of America, it is also true that the work of American historians can illuminate aspects of baseball history. In his thoughtful essay, " 'Matters Involving Honor': Region, Race, and Rank in the Violent Life of Tyrus Raymond Cobb," Benjamin Rader draws on the work of a number of historians of the South to explain the personality and actions of Ty Cobb, the Georgia Peach.

One of baseball's first superstars, Ty Cobb had a reputation as a man who played baseball to the hilt and as a person of violent temper. He was considered a "dirty" player by many of his opponents. His reputation was earned in the series of violent episodes that marked Cobb's life on and off the field of play. Rader's essay opens with a description of some of these incidents, and Rader then provides a chart of twenty-four cases of Cobb's violent behavior.

In seeking to explain the violence that dogged Cobb's life, Rader turns to Bertram Wyatt-Brown's *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South* as well as a number of other works on the subject of southern violence. Honor was central in the violent southern backcountry as it was in the more ritualized world of Southern gentlemen. Rader sees in Wyatt-Brown's work a key to understanding the violent behavior of Ty Cobb, who was a product of the southern backcountry. As such, Cobb was hypersensitive to the denigration of his region and imbued with the protocols of race. He was also aware of the significance of status in the stratified Southern society.

Honor, race, and status carried an underpinning of violence, both individual and group, ritualistic and spontaneous. Rader interprets the incidents of violence in Cobb's life as reflective of these values, with honor as the centerpiece.

Operating from this perspective, Rader offers a very different portrait of Ty Cobb than the one that has marked the conventional explanations of Cobb's behavior. This is a very interesting rendering and one that nicely illustrates the interconnected world of historical research and interpretation across disciplines and subdisciplines. Rader's creative use of the work of Southern

historians shines a new light on Cobb's troubled life and reveals the peculiarities of the history of his region.

The six essays that you are about to encounter represent some of the best work by contemporary baseball historians. They will introduce you to the wide variety of approaches to baseball history as well as the ways it can inform and be informed by the larger field of American History.

Enjoy.

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