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Most historians—even most baseball historians—pay scant attention to early amateur and semipro baseball in American towns except as a forerunner of what interests them more: the big-league teams and players in large cities. When they talk about nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century baseball, they really mean the professionals in the big leagues. They quickly describe what amateur play was like in general so that they can move on to their real interest: the major leagues and their professional players. Writers love to take on a subject like a famous professional player or team. Do you know how many biographies of Mickey Mantle have been published? Do we really need thirty?

Mark E. Eberle is one of the few who understand and recognize the importance of early baseball as it was played in towns around the United States beginning right after the Civil War, not just as a prelude to the establishment of the major leagues but for itself. With this book, Mr. Eberle joins the ranks of the few who have concentrated on the kind of baseball that was for many years—and is even now—played by amateurs and semi-pros in the small towns of America. This kind of baseball is closer to our everyday lives. In early town ball, the man who makes a home run today turns out to be your butcher or barber or schoolteacher tomorrow, so you already know him.

Amateur baseball was for many years an integral part of everyday living. Studying that kind of play requires a different kind of research. Instead of checking the New York Times and the Boston Globe, a researcher like Mr. Eberle must scour early newspapers with names like the El Dorado Daily Republican, the Fort Scott Daily Monitor, and the Chanute Tribune. He must consult old books like Beadle’s Dime Base Ball Player (1867), which often mention small-town baseball. With this kind of research he adds himself to an exclusive group looking not for names like Mickey Mantle but for the long-forgotten names of clubs and players in an obscure town in the southwest part of his state. The result is a kind of micrographic work that brings us up close to the players and their teams.

The small group of scholars that Mr. Eberle has joined includes Todd Peterson, who wrote Early Black Baseball in Minnesota (2010); Jeffrey Michael Laing, author of the biography Bud Fowler: Baseball’s First Black
Professional (2013); David Vaught, who wrote The Farmers’ Game: Baseball in Rural America (2012); L. M. Sutter, author of New Mexico Baseball: Miners, Outlaws, Indians and Isotopes, 1880 to the Present (2010); and Thomas K. Perry, who wrote Textile League Baseball: South Carolina’s Mill Teams, 1880–1955 (1993). A film producer who belongs in this group is Mark Honer, who produced a documentary called Town Teams: Bigger than Baseball (2016). The kind of books and films these writers create is the kind that reveals for us what our early forebears were doing and thinking.

In his book Mr. Eberle shows us that early baseball history in small towns has an importance beyond being the background for the big-league teams that attract so many writers as well as fans. A town’s social life often centered on its own small baseball park, where the team named after the town played and where visiting teams provided the challenge needed for a town’s progress.

Amateur baseball, often called town baseball, even when it has stopped being played, has left its mark on our towns in the form of the old-time baseball park, with flimsy wooden grandstands, uncomfortable bench seating, and sometimes rickety fences. These baseball parks have a long history with the building of towns. As Mr. Eberle shows, they were important gathering places for the people who built this country. In many cases they were the reason a town grew into a respectable, prosperous, and attractive place to live. Eberle gives us some solid verifying quotations from newspaper reporters of the time about the value of a town baseball team, which was well recognized—like this one: “One of the very best advertisements a town can have is a good base ball team. There will be no questions over that point.”

A baseball park was one of the first things townspeople talked about building as soon as they had established the basics like homes, a water supply, a school, a general store, and a church. In a few areas of Kansas, baseball took a while to become an acceptable activity because the residents thought it encouraged idleness, and idle, lazy youths were deeply distrusted. But in most Kansas counties, the people saw no harm in the game. They soon tired of the obstacle-filled pastures where they played at first (when they weren’t working) and dreamed of the ballparks with smooth diamonds, grandstands, and fencing that they knew were being built in some eastern states.

By the end of the 1800s many Kansas towns had constructed ballparks with grandstands, some of them with roofs to protect fans against bad
weather. As soon as they could, they fenced in the parks, so that they could charge admission—maybe ten cents—and therefore recoup some of the money they had invested in these parks. For these structures, as Mr. Eberle shows, were generally built at the expense of the residents, sometimes through taxes, but often through the contributions of businesses and civic organizations like the Elks Club, and even with individual gifts. Town residents recognized that a ballpark was meant for everyone to enjoy, so its residents contributed to keep it operable.

Teams were established in each town by groups made up of friends and neighbors, coworkers, coreligionists, and people who knew each other through some organization. Everyone in town was allowed to play, but the best players were soon discovered. They made up the team named for the town. And sometimes the best players were discovered in unexpected places, for town baseball immediately reflected the astounding diversity of Americans at play. A team might become desperate to win an important game and would hire a ringer so that winning would be practically assured. Eberle has found that this ringer might be a highly skilled African American player who could be paid to play for any white or African American club that needed him. If any Mexican Americans lived in the area, Mexican American teams formed and played against teams of white men. If any African Americans lived there, African American teams formed and played against teams of Mexican American and white players. Some American Indian teams passing through also played local white town teams.

If you doubt any of this, read the histories of the individual Kansas towns that Mr. Eberle has visited and studied. The early town newspapers are full of reports covering these interethnic games. Although a reporter might use stereotypical descriptions of players and their clubs of different ethnicities, the writer’s expressions seem not to have affected the enthusiasm with which the outsiders were welcomed.

And if you doubt that women and girls played baseball in these early days, check Mr. Eberle’s many references to their games that he found published in the town newspapers of Kansas. Like women’s teams in the early colleges of the Northeast, some of the Kansas women’s teams formed in the early colleges. Women often formed teams in town, too. Eberle has even found evidence of a women’s baseball league established by five towns in the Topeka area. Although some townspeople seemed startled to discover that women played baseball, Eberle reports no opin-
ions like major league club owner Albert Spalding’s decision flatly forbidding women to play.

The stories Eberle has found in which Kansas residents welcomed visiting teams of foreigners like Japanese teams are more evidence of early townspeople’s openness to diversity. Towns gladly hosted traveling black professionals, too, like the famous Kansas City Monarchs, as well as traveling Mexican teams from Mexico, traveling American Indian teams like those made up of army scouts and those from Indian Schools like Haskell, major league teams who occasionally presented exhibition games in towns, and traveling “bloomer girl” teams from many states.

Some of these traveling teams, like some of the Kansas town teams, were integrated. Women’s teams played against either women’s or men’s teams. Some women’s teams included a male player or two in their line-ups. Although some Kansas newspaper reporters seem to have been surprised by encountering women’s teams, that did not stop the women. Occasionally, a reporter admitted that a women’s team beat a men’s team.

This willingness of Kansas townspeople to host teams of persons unlike themselves was good for town business, for it multiplied the number of existing teams in operation. The railroads recognized early what baseball meant to a town and knew that establishing train stops at these lively towns would be good for their own business. Think how pleased a prospective newspaper publisher would be to have so much happening in town to write about! Baseball and other forms of intertown rivalry sold papers.

The local baseball park was a social center, as Mr. Eberle demonstrates. When an important traveling team like the Kansas City Monarchs came to town, businesses closed and everybody turned out to see the famous black team. If the park was full, boys and men climbed trees or nearby buildings to get a view of the game. On holidays, like “Old Settlers’ Day,” baseball became the headline event, after a bronco-busting contest, a baby show, and a horse race. At one of these celebrations, the umpire wore on his hip what a reporter described as “an enormous six-shooter.” No doubt he expected trouble, because everyone was excited.

There was no lack of variety in the teams that arose in small towns. Towns produced muffin teams, military teams, church teams, and young girls’ teams. Doctors played lawyers. Incarcerated men played outsiders. The House of David sent teams around the country to play town teams. So did the Ku Klux Klan.
Town teams could join any league that seemed right for them. One town had its own five-team league; three teams were composed of white players and two of black players. There were town amateur leagues, semipro leagues, professional leagues, minor leagues, twilight leagues, boys’ leagues, and college leagues. Some were set up for businesses (one business per league, or several), and some by civic organizations like the YMCA.

The leagues were often short-lived. They came and went depending on whether the town teams could afford to be members, and that depended on their income and community support, which varied. Teams tended to reorganize every year because whether they could play often depended on donations, promotions, and benefits held by fans. Towns might drop out of a league for the wheat harvest, which needed all hands, or not even start the season until the harvest was over. The situation was unstable, but while it lasted it was varied and colorful.

The boys who lived in towns had the advantage over city boys in that they could see and even talk every day to the players who displayed their baseball talents in the local games. In big cities, boys became hero worshippers who knew of the players’ skills and successes only at a distance. In the towns the boys needed only to walk down the street to hail the baseball stars. They knew that the fellows who won and lost the games were not heroes. Heroes are people who accomplish a deed that helps others even if it means they are putting themselves in danger. The First Responders are therefore heroes. Baseball players are not. They are skilled baseball players, some of them star players. City boys who saw baseball players as heroes were living in a fantasy world. Town boys who knew they were just men like any men, except for their baseball skills, were able to live closer to reality.

It was in the thirties that the towns knew they needed help in keeping their baseball parks in good enough shape to operate or in building a new one. The government stepped in, with the Works Progress Administration (WPA) building entire parks or refurbishing old ones. The WPA built more than 3,000 baseball parks around the country. Sometimes federal, state, and local agencies combined to collect the needed funds, and often local residents contributed their time, labor, and money as well. After all, the local baseball park was an emblem of their town, and they wanted a winning team playing in a nice-looking baseball park.

In the twenties and thirties, large organizations arose offering town
teams and other independent teams participation in important national
tournaments: the National Baseball Congress (NBC), for semipros; the
American Amateur Baseball Congress (AABC); and the Denver Post
Tournament. These tournaments welcomed some “amateurs” and “semi-
pros” who were really professionals. Clubs wanted to compete in these
tournaments because of the attractive cash prizes (this was the Great De-
pression), but they might find themselves competing against a famous
professional team led by Satchel Paige himself.

The viability of the town teams came into question before World War II.
Town teams were failing to attract enough customers for them to pay for
equipment and travel. Eberle explains the new models of play created with
the rise of youth leagues, high school leagues, and collegiate summer
leagues, as well as the changes in American culture with the advent of new
forms of entertainment and communication, like the radio. All of these
changes made town baseball lose money at the gate. But the beloved town
baseball parks were often saved, refurbished, and repurposed.

Eberle analyzes the reasons for which so many of the old town ballparks
still remain in recognizable form. He explains that the town ballpark (or
even its former site) appeals to a community’s view of itself. Generations
of fans (like Eberle himself) view it as a historical property, full of memo-
ries for everyone, like the memory of “the day Satchel Paige played here,”
the kind of moment in history Eberle brilliantly christens a “historical
waystation.” Millions of Americans have had this sort of connection with
the town ballpark.

So Eberle set out to visit the oldest remaining town baseball parks in
his state and find out how they came into existence, as well as how they
are doing now. Historians like to put their eyes on places they write about
and find out where the actions of history take place. They get a feeling for
what life there was like, a feeling that “puts clothes on” the people and
makes them real.

In the course of his research, which is dizzyingly thorough, Mr. Eberle
found the parks and took the time to study their history. His goal in writ-
ing this book was to provide a context for the continued preservation and
use for these parks, which he views as “living history.”

In preparing this history of early Kansas baseball, Mr. Eberle has given
us a valuable approach to understanding who we are as Americans. Our
past is there, inside ourselves as shared memories. All we need to do is
bring it to the foreground.
While reading Mr. Eberle’s book, I was startled to realize that I had found in it a way of reconnecting with my own earliest relationship with baseball—not in Kansas, but in Cleveland, Ohio, my hometown. My first job, which I began in the fall of 1950, was as a kindergarten teacher at Dunham School. Every morning I took a Hough Avenue bus to East 66th Street, where I got off, walked past a boarded-up building on the corner, and then entered the school next door, where I met with a roomful of five-year-olds to begin their formal education.

It was not until the next spring, when I read about the imminent demolition of the failing structures inside the board fencing, that I realized that every weekday I had been walking past the remains of the famous baseball site called League Park, where, since the late nineteenth century, famous and not-so-famous players had entertained thousands of fans. The Cleveland Indians baseball club had just built Lakefront Stadium, although they still used League Park afterward. They stopped using it shortly before I began my job as a teacher and discovered the identity of the fenced-in property. The Hough Avenue district had fallen into deep disrepair, and so had League Park.

It took years, but community leadership rescued the League Park site, and the Hough Avenue district has revived with it. League Park underwent a transformation that Mr. Eberle would approve: it has become a recreation facility that includes a community baseball diamond, the Cleveland Baseball Heritage Museum, and a community park with walking trails. It is part of a neighborhood restoration that has transformed a declining section of the city into a vital area where, as one woman resident put it, “there’s some place for people to go in the community.” A man who loved to play baseball claimed that he could “feel the presence” of former players there because “there has been greatness before us on that field.” All this is happening because some people cared about history.

We must all be grateful for work like that of Mr. Eberle’s, which re-adjusts our view of early baseball as valuable in itself instead of just as a prelude to the major leagues. I hope it inspires many others to open their own hometown history and find what has been going on in relation to the town baseball park there, and then take the time to share it all with us. I think they will find treasures that the rest of us will appreciate.