



BASEBALL IN AMERICA & AMERICA IN BASEBALL

EDITED BY

Donald G. Kyle & Robert B. Fairbanks

INTRODUCTION BY RICHARD CREPEAU

WITH CONTRIBUTIONS BY

BENJAMIN G. RADER, STEVEN A. RIESS, SAMUEL O. REGALADO,

DANIEL A. NATHAN, MARK DYRESON, & DAVID VAUGHT



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BASEBALL IN AMERICA

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CONTENTS



Preface *vii*

Introduction *1*

Richard Crepeau

“Our Players Are Mostly Farmers”:

Baseball in Rural California, 1850 to 1890 *8*

David Vaught

“Invisible Baseball”:

Japanese Americans and Their Game in the 1930s *32*

Samuel O. Regalado

Chasing Shadows:

The Baltimore Black Sox and the Perils of History *52*

Daniel A. Nathan

The Profits of Major League Baseball, 1900 to 1956 *88*

Steven A. Riess

Mapping an Empire of Baseball:

American Visions of National Pastimes
and Global Influence, 1919 to 1941 *143*

Mark Dyreson

“Matters Involving Honor”:

Region, Race, and Rank in the Violent Life
of Tyrus Raymond Cobb *189*

Benjamin G. Rader

About the Contributors *223*

PREFACE

The annual Walter Prescott Webb Lecture Series, held on March 9, 2006, focused on the theme of “Baseball in America and America in Baseball.” The theme is especially relevant for a university in a city home to a professional baseball team and its stadium, and the series coincided with first World Baseball Classic and spring training of Major League baseball.

The intention of the series was to invite noted historians of American sport to investigate the historical development of baseball in America and explain the rich symbolism of baseball for the players, spectators, and America. From rustic sandlots to monumental stadiums, from Little League to the World Series, baseball has long been an institution in American culture and society, but what does baseball mean in American history, and what is American about the game? Why are millions of fans, rich and poor, urban and rural, male and female, devoted to a game that is always long on strategy and sometimes short on action? How did baseball emerge historically from an archaic children’s game to become a pervasive national symbol and a vast commercial enterprise? What is the significance of baseball in the history of leisure, business, labor, immigration, race, and urbanization in America?

Although Professor Webb became famous as a historian of the frontier, and early volumes reflected his orientation, recent volumes have been innovative in approaches and themes. After our announcement of baseball as a theme, a retired faculty member who studied with Webb informed us that Webb also was a knowledgeable baseball enthusiast, and so the lecture series in his honor has come full circle.

The co-editors, whose research concentrates on ancient sport and urban history, do not profess to be experts in the history of baseball, but we invited four of the very best baseball authorities to present papers and contribute essays to the series: Benjamin G. Rader, James L. Sellers Professor of History at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, who gave the keynote; Steven A. Riess, Bernard J. Brommel Distinguished Research Professor at Northeastern Illinois University; Samuel O. Regalado, California State University, Stanislaus; and Daniel A. Nathan, Skidmore College. We applaud these experts for their scholarship, their lively and impressive presentations, and their collegial interaction with the large and engaged audiences in attendance. It is worthy of note that these fine scholars have all also made essential contributions to

the growth and success of the North American Society for Sport History and to the maturation of the field of sport history. This volume also includes the essays of the co-winners of the annual Webb-Smith Essay Competition: Mark Dyreson of Penn State University, and David Vaught of Texas A&M University. Chosen from an unusually large number of excellent submissions, their essays complement the lectures and expand the volume.

We recognize Dr. Richard Crepeau, University of Central Florida, himself an expert on baseball and American sport, for introducing Dr. Rader as our keynote speaker, and for contributing an insightful and articulate introduction to the volume. We thank Dr. Stephen Maizlish, from the Department of History at UT Arlington, for presenting Dr. Regalado's paper when he was unable to attend due to an emergency. Our thanks also go to Carol Lehman of University Publications for her assistance with publicity materials, and Susan Sterling and her staff for their attention to a myriad of details involved in the lecture series and this publication. We also greatly appreciate the assistance of the publication team at Texas A&M University Press. Finally, we recognize Dr. Joyce Goldberg, Chair of the Webb Lecture Committee, for her careful planning and coordination of the academic and social events.

◆ This volume is dedicated to the memory of Clay Gould (1971–2001), an inspirational baseball player and coach who became the University of Texas at Arlington's fourth baseball coach in 1999 at the young age of 27. He grew up in Arlington, Texas, and was an All-State third baseman for Arlington High School. He played baseball at UT Arlington and went to the NCAA tournament twice in his four years. The Southland Conference named him its 1993 player of the year and he was nominated for the prestigious USA Baseball's Golden Spikes award. After graduating he played professional ball for two years for the Tyler Wildcatters in the Texas-Louisiana League. He started his coaching career in 1994 as a volunteer assistant coach at UT Arlington, and he became a full-time assistant coach following the 1996 season and then head coach three years later. From the beginning he focused on making the university's baseball program one of the best in the nation. He out-recruited perennial baseball powers Mississippi State and Oklahoma in his first year. The next year his team won the Southland Conference Championship and claimed their first-ever NCAA tournament victory with a dramatic 7–6 win over the University of Houston.

Midway during his first year as head baseball coach, Clay underwent surgery for cancer. Despite this, he missed only three weeks of the 2000 season. Although doctors were optimistic about his recovery, he had a relapse

the following year and exploratory surgery that May found that the cancer was spreading rapidly. He died on June 23, 2001, leaving behind Julie, his wife of 19 months, and a 10-month-old daughter, Logan Soul. UT Arlington and baseball lost a great coach and a very decent human being.

Donald G. Kyle

Robert B. Fairbanks



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.

Richard C. Crepeau
University of Central Florida

“OUR PLAYERS ARE MOSTLY FARMERS” BASEBALL IN RURAL CALIFORNIA, 1850 TO 1890



On a hot Sunday evening in June 1887, the Davisville Oletas and the Dixon Etnas played the fifth of fourteen ballgames between the two rivals that summer. Several hundred fans crowded around the diamond at “the Y,” a triangular-shaped grounds bounded by the three railroad lines that converged at the Davisville depot. Sitting on grocery boxes, empty kegs, rocks, and small benches under the broiling sun, the spectators—“highly desirous of witnessing the contest,” as the local scribe put it—waited anxiously for the first pitch. The game did not meet their expectations, however. “The local nine played listlessly” and lost by a score of 18 to 7. The Etnas took home the one-hundred-dollar purse, and the betting in the stands amounted to hundreds of dollars more. Fortunately for the “disappointed” Oletas fans, another game was already scheduled for the following Sunday at Driving Park in Dixon, where their team would have a chance to “redeem themselves.” Sure enough, the Oletas returned the favor, beating the Etnas on their diamond and sending the Dixon fans home equally disheartened. By season’s end, the two teams split their summer series evenly, with fans from both towns “mourning the defeats” and cherishing the victories.¹

The excitement that baseball generated in these two small towns in the lower Sacramento Valley was by no means unusual. The game (an earlier version of it) was introduced to rural California during the Gold Rush, gradually gained a stronger foothold over the next two decades, and then caught fire in the 1880s, when farmers and townspeople began spending a great deal of time watching, playing, and reading about the sport in the local newspaper. By 1885, according to the same reporter, they had become “devoted to the game”—so much so that on the rare occasions when a Sunday evening in the summer went by without “their accustomed amusement,” life became “unbearably dull” for players and fans alike. The scheduled games, well-established venues, large crowds, newspaper coverage, fierce rivalries, high-stakes gambling, and close bonds between teams and residents all reveal

that baseball—heretofore regarded by historians as a largely urban phenomenon—had become deeply rooted in the region’s rural culture. One farmer went so far as to say that attending church on Sunday—or, more specifically, “seeking the salvation of our immortal souls”—had become “a matter of secondary importance.”²

The farmers’ devotion to the game in the 1880s raises three sets of interconnected questions—two historical, the other historiographical. First, just how “rural” was baseball in towns such as Dixon and Davisville? Were the players themselves farmers? Did the game that they played evolve differently from the one played by their urban contemporaries? Second, why did baseball become so popular in rural California at precisely this time? What was it about the 1880s—socially, culturally, and/or economically—that compelled rural residents to embrace the game so wholeheartedly?³ Finally, why have historians in large part missed this rather startling phenomenon? For at least three decades now, practitioners of both the new rural history and the new sport history have emphasized culture and society, but the two subfields have rarely intersected.⁴ We know much about agriculture and rural life during this period and a great deal about baseball’s development from a primitive game into a profession and, indeed, “the national pastime.” Why, then, do we know so little about baseball in late-nineteenth-century rural communities such as Davisville and Dixon?⁵

By focusing on one region, two towns, and a relatively small number of players and fans, this essay can offer a starting point for answering such questions.⁶ My examination, however brief and suggestive, adheres to the words of Jacques Barzun, which ring just as true today as when he first penned them in 1954. Historian after historian have quoted the first half of his pronouncement: “Whoever wants to know the heart and mind of America had better learn baseball. . . .” Few, however, have added the rest: “. . . and do it by watching first some high school or small town teams.”⁷ Barzun sensed that the essence of the game—its widespread popularity and cultural meaning—has always been fundamentally local. The Davisville-Dixon rivalry, therefore, needs to be understood in its rural context—not as a by-product of the developing urban-professional game. “Our players are mostly farmers,” wrote the Davisville correspondent.⁸ It would behoove us to consider his words seriously. The history of the game in the region, he knew, was interwoven with the history of the region itself.

Were the players, in fact, mostly farmers? The limited literature available would seem to suggest otherwise. Even the few scholars who have prom-

Not that there was much reason to doubt the word of the Davisville correspondent, a longtime resident named Elijah W. Brown, one of the most trusted and in-the-know members of the community. After migrating to the region from Missouri in 1855 via the Isthmus of Panama, Brown had tried his hand at a little bit of everything. He ran a cattle and grain ranch on Putah Creek with his half-brother, Gabriel, for a few years; worked as a bookkeeper for local wheat merchant William Dresbach; owned and operated his own hardware store in Davisville after the town was established in 1868; speculated in town lots from time to time; and organized the Sinclair Windmill Company, which helped promote a local irrigation movement in the 1880s. For most of that decade, he also wrote a weekly “Davisville Doings” column for the *Dixon Tribune* (and later for the *Yolo County Democrat*) under the byline of J. O. N. Brown. He left no subject of local interest unturned, from county politics (he was an avid Democrat), to crop conditions, to community gossip, to baseball. No one knew the history of the region, its farmers, the two towns, their residents, the game, and its players better—or expounded upon such matters more—than him.¹¹

That history began in the wake of the Gold Rush. A number of rural communities in northern California proliferated in the 1850s—not in the standard American fashion of settlers moving westward along a broad front, cultivating the land homestead by homestead, but communities nonetheless. Putah Creek, named for the river that ran west-to-east out of the coast mountains across the lower Sacramento Valley, was one such community. Most of the nine hundred transplanted midwesterners who settled it over the course of the decade came not to farm but to seek riches in gold. Those unfortunate to arrive after 1851, however, found that surface deposits had been depleted by the one hundred thousand 49ers who had gotten there ahead of them. Too ashamed to return home, they turned to agriculture and rural life with the same intensity of expectation that brought them to California in the first place. Admitting failure a second time would simply not be an option.¹²

Farming along Putah Creek, though often extraordinarily productive, proved immensely challenging. Using all the latest technology including McCormick reapers and treadmill threshers, farmers cultivated the region’s virgin soils to produce bumper harvests of sixty to eighty bushels of wheat per acre—four to five times the average “back home”—most of which helped feed the escalating populations of San Francisco and Sacramento. “The lands of Putah,” proclaimed one wide-eyed newspaper reporter in the fall of 1852, revealed “the magnificent results of agriculture under the bold and energetic patronage of its farmers.” Yet, not a single one of them made a

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