

## PASTUREBALL

Seven decades ago Jessie Lake Area residents were in the midst of the Great Depression. The year-round population was at its all-time peak.\* Most families lived on small farms, subsisting on the food they produced. Cash was earned by selling excess potatoes, milk and forest products. Those who lived on the lakes occasionally rented fishing boats to vacationers during the summer months. Some people had cars and shared rides, but roads were poor. When the “Gut and Liver” (Minneapolis and Rainy River Railroad) picked up its tracks in 1932, it added to the isolation and ended what little commercial dairying remained. Most people were hooked up to a common telephone line, but electricity did not arrive until after the War in 1945.

Four important institutions held the community together during this difficult time: churches, schools, families and baseball. Weekdays were consumed by farm work and school. Sundays were for church and baseball - church in the morning and baseball in the afternoon. Even during the winter months, preparations for the next baseball season were underway: sewing up old baseballs, carving new bats, mending old equipment, arranging schedules and waiting for the snow to melt.

In the early 1920s there were informal community pick-up baseball games on Sunday afternoons and occasional challenges between the young men of nearby communities. Sunday afternoon was, for most people, the only available daylight leisure time during the week - and the logical time to get together for a baseball game. As Sunday afternoon baseball became widespread across the county, the profusion of games complicated scheduling and required coordination. Recognizing the value of baseball to rural communities, Itasca County Agent Art Frick helped organize baseball teams, facilities, and leagues across the County. The first baseball league in Itasca County was organized in 1925 and included a joint entry from Jessie Lake and Wirt. Players on that first league entry included Henry Johnson, Herb DeWitt and Frank Rabbit, who became the entrepreneurs of baseball in the Jessie Lake Area. By 1933, Amateur Town Baseball included 34 baseball teams in Itasca County participating in five leagues. There were two leagues for the villages and three for the small rural communities, which included Jessie Lake, Bowstring, Spring Lake, Inger, Sand Lake, Marcell, Wirt, Dora Lake, Deer Lake and Hayslip’s Corner (Talmoon). Bigfork, Effie, and Deer River participated mainly in one of the village leagues.

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\*Past populations of the Jessie Lake Watershed Area can only be approximations since Census Districts (i.e. townships) do not coincide with the irregular boundaries of the JLWA., which consists of most of Jessie Lake and a small part of Bowstring Townships. The US Census, taken every ten years, recorded 351 persons living in Jessie Lake Township on April 1, 1940. This was the largest number of year-round residents recorded by the Census before or since that time.

On a typical mid-summer Sunday afternoon in 1933, according to the Grand Rapids Herald-Review, there were some 15 games involving 30 teams, with hundreds of persons attending each game in these weekly community events. Baseball mania reached a frenzy at the County Fair held in Grand Rapids each August, when county champions among villages and rural communities were determined. This level of baseball activity in a county with about 29,000 people at that time, represented a phenomenal participation rate - probably as high as any county in the state.

The Jessie Lake ballfield was on property owned by Herb DeWitt just south of the Norwegian Church (now gone) and the existing small cemetery. The Spring Lake ballfield was about a mile straight south of the present junction of County Roads 4 and 29 on State Forest property along the old county road. Outfield conditions were hazardous, and leg and ankle injuries were not uncommon, recalls Bob Schaar, who played in the outfield at both places. Cutting the grass was an all day Saturday chore if someone could find a lawnmower. Cattle grazing to keep the grass short was not entirely satisfactory for obvious reasons. In their dried state, cowpies sometimes served as bases, recalls Morris Gauper. A hat was often passed around on game days to help pay for new baseballs. Old baseballs were re sewn to extend their serviceability. Bats were often home made, carved from ash, birch or willow. Players provided their own gloves, which were often home-made as well. Most players wore their only pair of everyday shoes or boots. Game uniforms were usually sweat pants and shirts. The only catchers mask and chest protector were used beyond well worn, recalls Bob Schaar. In later years Dave Prestige kept the grass short with his haymower and team of horses. Playing conditions improved over the years. Home plate was permanently located in the southeast corner of the Jessie Lake ballfield. The outfield was defined by a row of trees, holes were filled, infield surfaces were smoothed, backstops and benches were constructed and cattle were evicted.

It is quite remarkable that some fine baseball talent emerged under these conditions. There were no organized development programs for youngsters, such as Little League, Babe Ruth or high school baseball. The older men on the Jessie Lake team, especially Henry Johnson and Herb DeWitt, shared their knowledge and time with the younger players. These included John B. Johnson, Tim DeWitt, Clarence "Casey" Dowling, Bob Schaar, Richard and Leonard Skaja, Loyal Younggren, Bertil Nyberg and others. These aspiring young men practiced with the older town team almost every evening after farm chores were done. The younger boys would shag fly balls, often without shoes or gloves (using the "soft catch" technique) and throwing, catching and hitting using the railroad depot as a backstop.

The vocational agriculture instructor at Deer River High School, Louis Schreiber, who coached the American Legion team in Deer River, made regular trips throughout the school district to inspect agricultural projects during the summer of 1934. This included the Jessie Lake Area where Mr. Schreiber noticed the baseball talent of several young

boys. So he arranged his inspection schedule to bring Tim, Bob and Casey to Deer River for American Legion games. Bob could hit and run down fly balls. Tim could throw hard, but wildly. Mr. DeWitt and Mr. Johnson worked with Tim on the fundamentals of pitching and converted Casey into a catcher, managing the game from behind the plate. Casey recalls that his first catcher's mitt was made for him from moose hide by one of the Poole brothers. After High School at Deer River, Casey joined the Civilian Conservation Corps at Day Lake where he both played and helped manage their baseball team. A difficult trip to North Dakota with his cousin Willard Lind to help with the grain harvest in 1939 convinced Casey that he should get an education. That fall he enrolled at the University of Minnesota where he studied Agricultural Education and played four years of baseball.

After graduating from the University, Casey played baseball for Mitby Sathers in the tough Minneapolis City League, then for the AAA Minneapolis Millers in the American Association as a reserve catcher in 1944 and 1945. Casey was an excellent hitter but slow on the bases because of a deformed right foot. This disability made him ineligible for military service. After a short career in professional baseball, Casey continued to play with various semi-professional teams in western and southern Minnesota while teaching agriculture at Watertown, Dassel and St. Peter high schools, and finally retiring from baseball in 1952. Casey now lives with his wife Bonnie in Sun Lakes, Arizona. Casey Dowling has been nominated to the Minnesota Baseball Hall of Fame.

Henry Johnson was the Jessie Lake postmaster, telephone exchange manager, school caretaker, and coordinator of the annual summer festival at Jessie Lake, besides operating his own small store and coaching baseball. During winter months he loved and promoted figure skating and hockey. John, the seventh of nine children of Henry and Anna Johnson, and one of the most promising young Jessie Lake baseball players, enlisted in the marines in 1942 and served in the South Pacific. After returning in 1945, he was "never quite the same" with moods of depression, according to those who knew him. On June 22, 1948 at the age of 26, he took his own life while cutting wood. Evidence suggests that the young John Johnson was probably afflicted by what is now known as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder as a result of his wartime experiences.

Herb DeWitt brought his family to Jessie Lake in 1920 and opened the H. J. DeWitt General Merchandise store about two years later. In addition to co-coaching the Jessie Lake team, Herb DeWitt supervised many baseball games as an umpire. Games were played with a single umpire positioned behind the pitcher calling balls and strikes and all fielding plays. Such responsibilities were entrusted only to the most respected citizens, and agreed upon by both teams. Knowledgeable in baseball rules and trusted as an impartial mediator, Herb DeWitt was in demand as an umpire. In 1939 he moved his family to Deer River to be closer to his pole yard business. His son Tim played with the Jessie Lake team until he was drafted into military service. After the War, Tim operated the DeWitt Cedar Yard in Deer River with his brother Bill, until selling the business in

1955. Tim DeWitt lived in Deer River until his death in February 2003.

Bob Schaar played mainly with the Spring Lake team where he was coached by Frank Rabbit. He worked as a state forester for 36 years, and is now retired with his wife Bernice and living north of Deer River. Richard Skaja, another local standout, was offered a contract to play with Kansas City of the American Association, but joined the Army and later chose a career in the Air Force.

Art Frick served for almost 42 years as the Itasca County Agricultural Agent for the University of Minnesota Extension Service. Mr. Frick was a passionate supporter of baseball in Itasca County. He served as commissioner of Region 13 for the Minnesota Baseball Association and served four terms in the State Legislature from 1962 to 1970. Art Frick was inducted into the Minnesota Baseball Hall of Fame in 1963.

Frank Rabbit played for Jessie Lake as a teenager in 1925 and later played and coached at Spring Lake. Encouraged by Art Frick, Frank Rabbit organized, managed and taught the game of baseball to young Native Americans in the Inger community. In the 1940s and 50s his Inger team won the North Itasca League championship in nine of its first 12 years. In 1953 the Inger team won the regional championship and played in the state tournament, losing only to the eventual state champions. Art Frick called Rabbit “one of the finest athletes - an outstanding hitter and fielder and a model of exemplary conduct and sportsmanship.” Frank Rabbit could have pursued a successful professional career in baseball, but chose to organize and teach baseball to younger players with “never a penny of pay”. Frank Rabbit was inducted into the Minnesota Baseball Hall of Fame in 1965.

Leo Hayslip bought the store at Talmoon on Highway 6 from Dick Hoover in 1930 and opened a tavern when prohibition ended. He accepted the advice of Fitger’s Brewery in Duluth, to promote his establishment with a dance hall and a baseball diamond, and gave him a mahogany bar to get him started. That same bar is still in use. The vacant Little Turtle School was moved next to the tavern and used as a dance hall. Mr. Hayslip then constructed a baseball diamond south of the dance hall and assembled a baseball team by enticing players from other teams. Casey Dowling accepted Leo’s offer of an ice cream cone for each game he played, with a double dip for an especially well played game! This reportedly led to some disagreement over the definition of “well played”. Mr. Hayslip succeeded in assembling championship baseball teams in the late 1930s. With a little sociability after the games, his enterprise became wildly successful. Morris Gouper recalls the many cars of baseball fans parked along Highway 6 on Sunday afternoons. But this new image for baseball (or was it an old image?) was at the expense of some community support!

Baseball, an adaptation of the English game of cricket, had its beginnings in Eastern cities in the early 19th Century and spread relentlessly westward as the frontier was settled. Community standards in the 19th century held that pleasurable physical activities were

vulgar and sinful. These included dancing, drinking, gambling, prize fighting, horse racing, billiards, burlesque and baseball - which was derisively called "pasture ball" by some. Idle hands were believed to contribute to idle minds, laziness, greed and moral decadence. Most rural folks subscribed, in practice at least, to John Calvin's edict that wasting time and pleasurable indulgences were evil. In one notable case, Dave Prestidge, a deacon in the Lutheran Church, was suspended for playing baseball on Sunday. While the Lutherans seemed somewhat tolerant and forgiving of errant behavior, the Baptists were unconditionally opposed to baseball on Sunday, emphasizes Bob Schaar.

Most rural people considered themselves virtuous as evidenced by their hard work and wariness of leisure and its temptations. So how did industrious rural people get mixed up with this corruptive activity called baseball? Perhaps people just liked to play and watch the game - and they were determined to do so in spite of the moralists. Furthermore, they experienced benefits to themselves and their communities. Baseball exemplified the American virtue of working hard to achieve success. Its supporters argued that baseball enhanced both competition and cooperation - traits observed and revered by Alexis de Tocqueville in his travels across America.

Just as amateur baseball was **the** major weekly social event in Itasca County during the summer, so were local baseball players the heroes whom people knew personally. Many had heard of Babe Ruth, Ted Williams and Ty Cobb, but there was little information about them or interest in professional sports. The professional Minneapolis Millers and St. Paul Saints of the American Association, were 200 miles away and attracted little interest. In the 1930's there was no electricity and no radio - and of course no television to broadcast news or sporting events. Some people received the weekly Deer River News which provided space on the front page to report local baseball results.

During WWII amateur and professional baseball activity was greatly reduced and diluted as many athletes joined the war effort. Furthermore, gas and materials were rationed and travel restricted. After WWII there was a strong, but brief, baseball revival that faded after about a decade. Many former baseball players were drawn to distant places and new opportunities. Economic conditions changed. Rural, as well as city residents, were experiencing a new prosperity. Now people could afford to buy new cars and travel long distances on improved roads. People acquired conveniences and luxuries that had not been available before the war, including television sets, boats with motors, and lake cabins. Families could now take weekend trips to fish, camp, swim and relax. In the 1950s television brought major league sports and other entertainment directly into people's homes. Beginning in 1961, the major league Minnesota Twins captured people's attention across the state, supplanting their hometown amateur teams. For many people, interest in baseball changed from a participatory community activity to a passive spectator sport.

At the state level, amateur baseball activity reached its peak in about 1950, with over 800

town teams across the state. The Itasca County baseball participation peak probably was reached about a decade earlier before the War. In 2004 there are no amateur town baseball teams representing Itasca County among the 130 teams registered with the Minnesota Baseball Association.

With the decline of small town baseball something was lost in the fabric of communities. New conditions were brought about by a changing world, including new technologies in communication, transportation and marketing that were beyond the control of local communities. Now most rural baseball diamonds in Itasca County are neglected and overgrown - some have been returned to pasture or woodland. After baseball, the Jessie Lake diamond was used as a dump and landfill. Was this the symbolic last word and appraisal from baseball's disparagers?

If we take a walk behind the old cemetery at Jessie Lake, along the old county road south of Spring Lake, or south of Hayslip's, we might still hear the voices of happy competitors and cheering throngs of community loyalists enjoying a Sunday afternoon at their "field of dreams".

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