

Reflect on the history of baseball in Billings

Courtesy Joyce Jensen
Historian, Western Heritage Center

The city of Billings has embraced and celebrated the sport of baseball for generations. Now we celebrate the grand opening of the new ballpark, which will cement baseball in the lives of the future generations of our community.

In the midst of the ballpark opening, certainly a historic event in itself, we have the opportunity to reflect on and appreciate the history of baseball in Billings.

From Joyce Jensen, a historian, and the Western Heritage Center Archives are a few tidbits of the history of baseball in Billings.

* In July, 1897, Billings played Miles City at the fairgrounds (now North Park) on both Saturday and Sunday, but only after the program wild west show, including outlaw horses, wild steers to ride, roping and tying, bundle jumping, polo matches and an attack on a stagecoach. Reports in the Miles City Star referred to the Billings team as the "Alkali Flaties." The Billings Gazette called the Miles City team the "Pumpkin Rollers." The Gazette depicted the "boudyism" on the field after a player yanked off the catcher's mask and tried to punch him and another player grabbed the umpire by the throat.

* By 1909, the ball field was at the "Country Club" owned by Austin North, northeast

of North Park. Later, when that ball park was demolished, Austin North's son, John, recalled being remembered as "the kid whose dad knocked down the ball field."

* American Legion Baseball began in Billings during the summer of 1928. The team shared the same field with a semi-professional team, Eddy Davis, "Mr. Baseball" in Billings, worked with the Legion team for decades. Considering the players family, he checked on players grades, SAT scores, behavior, and even helped players get scholarships to attend college.

* Billings has seen some notable players in its parks, both on Mustang teams and as Mustang opponents. Some of baseball legends that played in Billings include George Brett, Sachel Paige and Mark McGuire. Dave McNally and Jeff Ballard, two hometown heroes, played professional ball. Country music star Charley Pride played for Helena. Babe Ruth made a special appearance in Billings in 1947.

* The Little League baseball program was initially run by Gene Lissa and Cecil Mussberger. Ten teams used the Lissa Field Little League field, where any player broke a window during a game earned \$5 - if they broke a window during practice they had to pay for it.

* Deep into the depression of the 1930s, fifty men pledged \$10 each to buy land for a new ball park. John North donated land so the money raised could be used for improvements.



Early ball field, Billings.

Courtesy Jeff Hagaman

Workers for the Works Progress Administration (WPA), a federal relief program, built stands and bleachers. Unfortunately, a fire soon burnt the park to the ground and insurance only covered a portion of the loss. WPA relief efforts soon rebuilt the ball field.

*The Midland Empire League, which pre-

ceded the Pioneer League and the Mustangs, consisted mostly of teams in the Yellowstone Valley. The teams were sponsored by Lard and Rebbery and several Billings merchants.

* There were more than 1,000 suggestions

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Early Baseball History

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