

# Professional Baseball and American Culture in the Progressive Era

by  
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Professional baseball was one of the leading American institutions of the Progressive Era. Yet the conventional wisdom about the sport then when it was at its height, was full of inaccuracies. The widely accepted ideology of baseball asserted that the national pastime was a sport of indigenous rural origins which epitomized the finest traditional American values and inculcated those values among its spectators. Crowds at ball games were supposed to come from all segments of society, although emphasis was placed on their poverty and rural origins. Club owners were also mythologized. They were portrayed as selfless philanthropists who operated their team as a public trust out of a concern for the community's welfare.

The ideology of baseball fit in well with fundamental American beliefs, values, and traditions. It helped reinforce the world view of the native white Americans. These notions were largely myths which can be placed in three categories: agrarianism, social integration, and social democracy. These were some of the principal themes of the Progressive Era as seen by such historians as Richard Hofstadter, Arthur Link, George Mowry, Peter Schmitt, and Robert Wiebe.

Baseball was generally regarded as a rural, indigenous sport. This idea was reflected in the myths of its rural origin, the names, locations, and structure of the baseball parks, and the belief that most ballplayers came from small towns or rural communities. The sport was widely perceived as possessing many of the finest American qualities which had originated on the frontier or the rural countryside. Baseball was seen as an extension of the frontier into the cities where it supposedly indoctrinated urban folk into the traditional American value system.

The arcadian imagery was evident in various aspects of the baseball parks. They were located in middle class neighborhoods far from the central city and the industrial districts. The playing areas were referred to by such terms as "parks," "fields," or "grounds." The first "stadium" was not constructed until 1923. The interiors were painted green to bolster the rural connotations.

The magnates who operated the teams were leading urban politicians who were interested in baseball as an investment and a source of boodle. They utilized their political connections to protect their teams against interlopers, obtain inside information about traction routes and land values, secure police protection, and keep taxes low. It would have come as a great shock to native white Americans to discover the control that urban politicians, one of their principal enemies, had over baseball, an institution which epitomized the finest qualities of the older America.

Major leaguers were mainly born in cities (58.4 percent), and not in rural areas (41.6 percent), even though just 37.9 percent of the population in 1890 lived in cities. These athletes were idolized by native white Americans because they verified for them the continuing functionalism of traditional values in a rapidly changing society. The ballplayer was regarded as a rugged individualist who achieved his position solely on the basis of ability. They were used as role models to help indoctrinate youngsters from all social backgrounds into the traditional American value system. Successful ballplayers were rewarded after retirement with white-collar positions. Merely one in seven fell into the blue-collar ranks.

The rituals of baseball were regarded as a valuable source of social integration for adults. Fans were supposed to develop a strong sense of identification with their community (even though few, if any of the players came from their town). Participation in the rituals was said to provide a safety valve for their tensions. It was also thought to help acculturate immigrants.

The ability of baseball to serve as a means of integration and assimilation depended to a large degree on the ability of all people to attend games and participate in the rituals. However crowds at games were not representative of the social composition of cities. but were mainly comprised of leisured middle class males who could leave their offices in the afternoon. Most urbanites worked long hours each day except Sunday, and could not attend an afternoon amusement except on the Sabbath, a day when games were generally prohibited. And the cost of a fifty cent ticket was expensive for manual laborers. Only after World War I did crowds become truly heterogeneous and representative of urban populations. This was a result of increased wages, a decrease in hours of work, and the legalization of Sunday baseball.

Just as the public believed that baseball spectatorship was democratic, they thought that the recruitment patterns for ballplayers was also democratic. The ideology of baseball claimed that any hardworking young man with talent and perseverance could succeed. Baseball was viewed as an excellent source of social mobility for poor youths with limited opportunities for advancement.

In reality though, baseball was not an important source of vertical mobility. There were few positions available at the top at any given time, and most of them went to sons from either white-collar (39.6 percent) or farming families (21.8 percent). They were far better educated than most men their age since nearly one in five had attended college. Furthermore, none of them were black and just a handful came from recent immigrant stock. They were nearly all of native white, Irish or German backgrounds.

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## Reaction

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In “American Baseball and American Culture in the Progressive Era” (1895-1920) we have the third of Professor Riess’s papers on baseball in this era in as many meetings of NASSH. Because this one incorporates many of the points of Riess’s first paper linking major league club owners with urban politicians in much sleazy influence peddling, together with much from Riess’s second paper on the question of organized baseball functioning as a ladder of mobility opportunity for players of both “native” and immigrant backgrounds, this paper might be regarded as a summary of Riess’s recent work.

In this paper Riess rekindles these earlier points and adds new faggots to light up our knowledge of this era of American cultural and ongoing national character development. Among the newer points vouchsafed is the notion of American baseball as a *mass* entertainment institution capable of reflecting fundamental characteristics of the American