
Baseball and the Coal Mining Community - the 1930s

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Although baseball and coal have been linked together in Western Pennsylvania since the nineteenth century, the development of baseball as the major recreational activity for dozens of small mining towns came with the need for expanded coal production and the extension of trunk railroad lines into the region in the early 1900s.

The hardships of life in a mining town depressed a growing population that had the additional problems of a mixed heritage. Baseball proved to be the one cohesive element that brought young and old, men and women, Catholic and Protestant, management and labor together. Baseball was played from April to October by everyone on whatever vacant space was available in these compact communities. Eclipsing all in pride and interest was the town team ready to take on all comers.

An outstanding example of baseball as a social force was the development of the Rochester and Pittsburgh Coal Company Baseball League that flourished between the wars. Since the mine and the community were one, mine superintendents took charge of the teams, combining their employees' ranks for players and often traveling great distances to offer a promising youngster a job "above ground." Ballplayers were told to "get your bucket" at 11:00 on game days although the game didn't begin until 4:30. As the depression took a grip on the economy of the country, the work week for miners was cut to three days, except for ball players.

The teams had the best of equipment, new uniforms each year, and three new Reach American League baseballs for every game. The fact that the miners had to contribute fifty cents out of their paycheck to finance these costs was not disputed until the union became strong in the late 1930's. Each town had a well-kept field, often with grandstands and a scoreboard. The grass was cut and the infield raked at company expense.

League games were played twice a week with exhibition games on off-days. Double-headers highlighted the national and religious holidays and once in a while even the great Negro baseball team, the Homestead Grays, would come to town to play. The games were witnessed by thousands, including fans of the visiting team, who often walked many miles to watch their heroes play. The large crowd sat close to the field, spilling beyond the grandstand to the foul lines and into the outfield. Umpires were furnished by the teams and

usually were listened to by the players, even if the fans, particularly the women, constantly challenged them. Ice cream and pop were sold to those who hadn't prepared a snack, and the ladies of the home team would furnish supper for both sides after the contest.

Many of the players had played minor league ball, but with growing families most decided to give up professional ball for the higher pay and security of their jobs with the coal companies. The R & P League gave them a chance to show what they might have become. For a few, the season of 1937 provided the opportunity to participate in the National Baseball Federation tournament in Dayton, Ohio.

This tournament, however, was "the last hurrah" for organized baseball in the coal towns. Unionization quarrels had caused the cancellation of the entire 1933 season, and by the late 1930's the union removed the special privileges given ball players. This greatly weakened both the league and the hold the teams had on the public fancy. Other forms of recreation and entertainment were now more accessible. The R & P League did not organize in 1939 and the Second World War was a convenient reason for suspending even the informal teams, and there was no attempt to revive them afterwards.