

# Below Semi-Pro: Baseball in Small Texas Towns, 1898-1921

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The first authenticated match game of baseball in Texas was in 1867, intercity baseball began in the 1870s, and both amateur and professional leagues existed in the 1880s. There were fourteen professional leagues by 1895. Despite the proliferation of organized baseball, the game continued to prosper below even semi-pro, where match games were the norm through the 1920s. Little is known of these teams, their players, or their motives. However, the oral history accounts, memoirs and scrapbooks of Ruben Thomas Anselin, who played for and managed such teams from 1898-1921 provide unusual insight. Anselin first saw baseball on July 4, 1898. He taught himself to play using homemade equipment while living on ranches and in the tiny town of China. From 1902-1913 he lived in Bay City, Texas, which had a "town team" for most of those years. He played for the town and for whatever other teams would take him whenever he could; by age twenty he was a highly skilled, much sought after player. During 1910 and 1911 Bay City fielded a professional team in a Class D league, but found the venture unprofitable. Thereafter, the young men of the town had less enthusiasm for local baseball and more often played for other towns which had welcomed them in 1910 and 1911.

In 1914 the Anselins moved to Eagle Lake, Texas, a town with rich baseball heritage. For that season an Oklahoma Indian spitball pitcher, Roy "Chief" Chouteau, had been hired to live in Eagle Lake and play for the team. The season began successfully with Chief fulfilling his promise and drawing big crowds. Then May 9 a gambler-controlled team from Moulton came for a three-game series. They took two of the games and the Chief, to whom they offered a much higher salary. However, he was not happy with Moulton and within three weeks announced his intent to rejoin Eagle Lake when they came to Moulton for a series. Enraged, Moulton manager Robbins got Chief in a bar and an argument and shot him dead. Robbins was arrested and indicted, but the case was never tried or disposed of in any legal manner. Apparently no one demanded justice for a "Drunk Indian." Within the month the Moulton team had disbanded, and the town never had a real team again. Eagle Lake went on to complete a successful season and continued to field as many as three town teams for years to come.

Anselin managed the Eagle Lake teams from 1917 through 1921, and is particularly proud of several successful teams consisting entirely of "home town boys," no hired help. Two of the youngest of these players, with much encouragement and financial help from the town, went on to play college baseball at Texas A & M and the University of Texas, and one completed a long professional career in the Texas League.

The kind of "match-game" baseball played in these small towns between 1898 and 1921 shared many of the problems and scandals of organized baseball and of society at large: gambling, racism, and political chicanery. However, each team was different, reflecting the town it represented. The worst were gambler-controlled collections of journeymen and has-beens after a fast buck. The best were simply local citizens, playing for the honor of the home town and their own real love of baseball.