

The Pennsylvania Railroad Company's Influence on Baseball in Altoona, Pennsylvania: The Beginning, 1862–1884

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From its organization in Philadelphia in 1823 to its decline in the late 1950's, the Pennsylvania Railroad Company was one of the main sources of economic development for America. In 1846 the Company embarked on an industrialized undertaking to open the Allegheny Mountains to efficient rail transportation between the cities of Philadelphia and Pittsburg. This early effort marked the beginning of one of the largest and most important rail systems in the United States.

In 1849, the Pennsylvania Railroad Company established the shops necessary to build and maintain a railroad in Altoona, and thus, created a city for its own purpose. The Company soon realized that in addition to building a railroad, it was fostering a city, and immediately established institutions to provide for the total welfare of both employees and the community. Welfare institutions included those for social and recreational needs, which were responsible for baseball's early development in Altoona. For over a century during the railroad's prominence, baseball became a force in the recreational habits of railroad employees and the community of Altoona.

Evidence suggests the Pennsylvania Railroad Company brought a form of baseball to Altoona from Philadelphia during the 1850's, through the influx of ethnic groups to man the shops. Early forms of baseball was probably townball, but by 1862, the New York game was being played in Altoona. Early railroad influence on baseball in Altoona was through employees playing on community organized clubs, and generous donation of property and labor for construction of playing fields. Occasionally, "picked nines" from shops' employees played matches against each other and various clubs in and around the community.

From 1874 to 1880, moderate interest in cricket emerged, as railroad clerks and shops' workers formed teams and engaged in matches. Though cricket interest was shortlived, the Company formed a cricket club and constructed a cricket field in 1878. But until the facility was raised in 1935, baseball was the premier sport of the cricket field.

The early 1880's, witnessed a decline in "picked nines" from across railroad shops, and the beginning of divisional and departmentalized structure of baseball, as individual shops and departments within shops, formed teams and leagues. By 1884, seven teams composed exclusively of individual shops' employees and clerks were organized.

The Pennsylvania Railroad Company's early influence and support for baseball under the guise of social and recreational welfare for its employees, helped develop a strong baseball tradition in Altoona. A tradition which at the turn of the century, led to highly competitive works baseball, composed of shops' and clerks' leagues, and systems baseball, a league composed of select railroad teams from across Pennsylvania. This tradition produced a quality of railroad baseball that attracted professional teams to play exhibition games against the local railroad systems and All-Star teams.