

Anatomy of a Murder: Reevaluating the Role of Television in the Decline of the Minor Leagues in the Early 1950s

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Directly following World War II, baseball's minor leagues witnessed the greatest growth in their history. Rising from a skeletal minor league system maintained during the war, leagues dormant by years of war and depression, as well as brand new circuits, came to life and placed teams in practically every significant city in the United States and Canada. Amid this-post-war prosperity, minor league attendance boomed to 40 million in 52 leagues in 1947 and 41 million in 59 leagues in 1949. However, almost as quickly as the minors expanded, they suffered a sharp decline, with leagues folding and merging at the rate of five leagues lost per year throughout the early 1950s. By 1952, the minors attracted only 25 million to their 43 member leagues and by 1959, only 21 million fans attended games in 21 minor leagues.

Historians have traditionally cited television broadcasts of major league games as the primary reason for the minors' decline after the war. By comparing the health of the minors in the late 1940s to that of the late 1950s, historians have equated the minors demise as directly proportional to the increased impact of television. However, the blame for this decline needs to be placed on many factors. Neglected has been a close examination of the changing nature of the minors during this period and, more importantly, the range and impact of television broadcasts. paramount in any study of the effect of television on sports attendance in this period must be the effects of the FCC freeze of new broadcast television licenses, which limited television to larger cities until 1953. Most studies of the decline of the minors assume that television broadcasts spanned across the nation as early as 1950. However, minor league teams and leagues that existed outside the range of television broadcasts were just as susceptible to failure as those within television markets.

Using the rich source material available for research on television and sports, this paper discusses the three major reasons that the minor league system shrunk in the early 1950s before television spread to every corner of the country. First, it examines the effect of the shrinking farm systems of the major league clubs and the added financial burden placed on minor league clubs forced to operate as independents. Second, it traces the inherent financial instability of minor league clubs in smaller cities and lower classes. Third, it examines the feasibility of maintaining an unprecedented number of minor leagues in a period well before major league expansion (a force that would increase the number of teams needed to support player development). A holistic approach to this question will place minor leagues in the complex culture of the United States after the war and will better place the role that television had in its demise.