

The Lee County Legend

K E E P I N G T H E M E M O R I E S A L I V E

Coalfield Baseball... Part 1

In this issue of the *Lee County Legend* and the next, we are highlighting "Coalfield Baseball".

Looking at a map of the area, you can get a snapshot of the coal field towns that influenced Lee County baseball. If you draw a line from Pennington Gap to Harlan to Hazard to Williamson to Bluefield, then back to Pennington Gap, you will encompass coal mining baseball communities of the Appalachian Mountains. A few, like, Chevrolet, Cumberland, Pikeville, Elkhorn City, Welch, Haysi, Grundy, Hurley, Dante, Clintwood, St. Paul, Coeburn, Norton, Appalachia, Dorchester, Big Stone Gap, Stonega, Keokee, Dryden and St. Charles stand out in our memories.

For baseball in this mountainous region, ball fields had to be carved out to be as flat as possible and according to Don Williams, the list of ground rules was always long and usually funny. Coal region ball fields were distinctive for sure, but, "Coalfield Baseball" is more than the places it was played.

"Coalfield Baseball" was, according to many former players like Williams, Paul Fred Hammonds and Sonny Martin:

- Established pro and semi-pro teams whose talent was "a cut above",
- The practice of coal companies putting players on the payroll so they could play on the town/community teams,
- A brand of baseball – head's up, no nonsense baseball played a little on the rough side,
- Our way of life.

We know "Coalfield Baseball" was special. Roughly spanning from the late 1800's until the 1960's, baseball was an essential ingredient of this coal mining region. The fields, the limited capacity to own equipment, the style of play and the players were all directly tied to the coal industry.

Baseball played in the Virginia, Kentucky and West Virginia Coalfields produced a few major leaguers. Mainly, it produced pride in communities, joy for the fans and excitement for the players. Levels of play stretched from playground to little leagues, high schools, amateur and semi-pro town teams and finally to full professional teams.

Because coal mining is a rough, tough way of life and because the Appalachian Mountains are not conducive to smooth, level, manicured fields, the very game had to be changed to fit. This fact, along with the fierce competition garnered between the coal camps and communities for bragging rights, produced the reputation of "Coalfield Baseball".

Today, the memories are pleasure for any of us who participated. Regardless of the name, we know baseball played in the coalfields, our baseball, is "Coalfield Baseball". It has a place in history.



My Lonesome Pine League Experience

Dave Audia

For one full summer and part of another, Louis, my brother, and I played for the Clintwood team in the Lonesome Pine semi-pro baseball league. Louis was 16 and I was 15 in that early summer of 1962. There were no recruiting wars nor any signing bonuses.

We found that we were truly boys playing in a men's league. Players were probably in their late 20's and 30's, proving that they could still play.

Most had played up and now were on their way down. Some were like Swede Sage, at the ripe old age of 40 something, still a terrific hitter. Some, like Don Williams and Jack Rasnic were young and could have been playing pro ball at a higher level.

Others, because minor league travel was horrible with small pay, chose to end their aspiring careers early. They came back to join those who never left, to earn a living in the mines and play ball on the weekends. These guys were talented and tough. When applying a tag, I was never certain of how to brace for a collision while preparing to dodge high flying spikes at the same time.

Louis and I rode to the games with Lawrence Statzer, Swede Sage, Gene Parsons and sometimes Willie Bailey or Cousin Hershhal. On return trips, after a stop to get gassed up (and for some of the older players to get tanked up), Louis or I drove home.

Prior to our first game, the team owner, a big burly man, always dressed in a suit, brought out contracts for Louis and me. He said they were papers we needed to sign in order to protect our amateur status. We signed without reading the fine print, nor the big, bold print either.

We played at decent, and sometimes, not so decent, ball fields in places like Dante, St. Paul, Haysi, Coeburn, Norton and Clintwood, all Virginia coal mining towns. At our home field in Clintwood, there was always a large crowd for the Sunday doubleheaders. The team owner passed the hat at just the opportune time, just after a big hit or a great defensive play for the home team. Between games, he had us sit under the big shade tree on the little hill that overlooked the field just on the edge of Clintwood. He would pay the pros and have someone bring on the chicken dinner. The chicken was good and plentiful. When we traveled to other communities, the crowds were sparse and so was the chicken.

This experience created so many memories. Most of the good ones center around the characters.

Lawrence Statzer would tell us 2 or 3 times each week, "Now boys, I can't hit, field, throw or run anymore, but other than that, I can still play this *#!^*! game".

Swede Sage. At 40 years plus, he could still hit those line drives. He just didn't feel like running the bases anymore. My cousin, Hershhal McElyea, could still throw the ball hard. He told us that his goal was to throw the ball back to the pitcher harder than the pitcher threw it to him.

Continued in next column.....



We are researching leagues and players of the Coalfields. Please help us compile the list for here and permanently on our website. Send names to us. [Www.leecountylegend.com](http://www.leecountylegend.com)

Lowell Lawson

LEAGUES

- Appalachian League
- Lonesome Pine League
- Mountain States League
- Mountain State League
- The Virginia Valley League -1910

Lee County players who played in the coalfields. Send us names of those not yet listed.

Walker Cress	Rudy Parsons	Hack Pope
Hobart "Lefty" Scott	Tye Harber	R Willams
Frank "Lefty" Scott	Frank Smalley	Swede Sage
Big John Livinston	J Young	Bill Kelly
Pee Wee Herndon	Buford Rhea	Red Walker
Hershel McElyea	Spot Johnson	Doc Tritt
Lawrence Statzer	Bill Halstead	Jack Rasnic
Cowboy Barker	Don Williams	J Young
Beattie Feathers	Bob Bowman	C Wax
Perle Stewart	Gene Parsons	? Skaggs
Frank Graham	Lefler Herndon	K Wax
Jim Lanningham	Martin Boren	Bill Green
C R McPherson	? King	? Cotter

Continued from column 1...

The uniforms we wore are worth remembering. The baggy, scratchy, gray wool uniforms didn't match exactly. They all had the same team name on them but it was obvious that they had been made in different years more than a year or two apart. Louis and I wore them proudly.

Playing in the Lonesome Pine League meant so much to me then, but now the memory is the real treasure. What a privilege it was - the opportunity to play semi-pro baseball in a league that would fit into anyone's definition of "Coalfield Baseball". Coalfield Baseball as we knew it then was coming to a close.

Louis and I came along at just the right time to get to play ball in such a historically important time and place. We wouldn't have missed it for the world.

Professional Baseball In Lee County

Coalfield baseball is a complex entity. First of all, the geographical limits are inexact. Simply, it can be said that if coal was mined and baseball was played it was coalfield baseball.

It would be nearly impossible to find anyone who lived in the coal mining regions that stretched from Pennsylvania to Virginia whose life was not touched by baseball. Player, sponsor, or fan, whatever role they filled, baseball was part of their life.

The levels of competition ranged from “pickup” games on a school playground or a Sunday afternoon neighborhood contest. In future issues we will discuss these in detail. For now let us look at professional baseball in Lee County.

Professional baseball almost carries a fantasy image for most of us. Every generation has its heroes. Ball parks are filled with fans wearing jerseys emblazoned with favorite team names and the names and numbers of players.

Lee County cannot lay claim to a rich historical heritage of professional baseball. At the same time there are enough players, executives, leagues, and teams whose stories could fill a book.

The Pennington Gap Lee Bears of 1937 and 1938, the Pennington Miners of 1939 and 1940 played in the professional Appalachian League. From 1948—1951, the Pennington Miners were reborn to play in the professional Mountain States League. In addition, there were other leagues located in close proximity in Kentucky, West Virginia, and Tennessee who selected talented Lee County athletes to play on their teams. Many Lee Countians were faithful fans of these teams.

Read Carefully...It Gets Confusing

Obviously coalfield baseball in Lee County and surrounding geographical regions carried a strong mountain image. Nowhere was that better seen than in the names of the professional leagues.

The first league was established in 1910. The Virginia Valley League operated for only one season. Perhaps the most notable fact is that legendary pitcher Cy Young managed The Huntington, W. Va team. The league became the Mountain States League in 1911. The league lasted only two seasons.

The Appalachian League was born in 1911. That first version of the league lasted just four years. The league reformed in 1921, with that incarnation of the league managed five seasons, closing up shop midway through 1925. In 1937, the league was restarted with a team in Pennington Gap until 1940. During World War II, while most other minor leagues ceased operations, the Appalachian League played on. It continued until 1955. In 1957, the modern Appalachian League began and is still going today.

In 1948 the Mountain States League was again activated, It lasted for seven seasons. Virginia teams were the Big Stone Gap Rebels 1949-1953, Norton Braves 1951-1953, and the Pennington Gap Miners 1948-1951. Lee County’s Virgil Q. Wacks, was president for the duration of the league

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Or, you may read all issues and more free online at our Website: www.leecountylegend.com
Let us hear from you with your stories, articles and pictures!!

BLACKS IN COALFIELD BASEBALL

“Coalfield Baseball” included black teams and black players with distinct talent. There were few newspaper accounts. *The Lee County Legend* desires to include all groups who played ball. Please send your stories, articles and pictures that depict sports events and players of the black community of Lee County.

PVN – 1990s - By: Clyde I. Orr

Submitted by Paul (Fred)Hammonds

When I was a youngster growing up on a farm near the fairgrounds or Leeman field, the ball park was the center for most of the activities which occurred in Pennington . For many years, that baseball park was the largest enclosed baseball field in the world, encompassing approximately 15 acres. Fans from all of Lee County supported their professional baseball team, which for a period of time was a member of the Appalachian League and later the Mountain States League.

Lee County produced many fine baseball players. A few which came to mind are: Walker Cress - Hobart “Lefty” Scott - Herbert “Pee Wee” Herndon - Clay “Cowboy” Barker - “Red” Walker - “Big Doc” Tritt - Buford Rhea - Rudolph “Rudy” Parsons. There were many others.

The most outstanding local player I ever saw was a tall, muscular friend of our family... who worked hard to help his family eke out a living as a tenant farmer and sometimes a handyman. He seldom had an opportunity to play baseball because he was not included. He was not deemed acceptable to sports in many parts of the country. He was guilty of the crime of being black. In those days, it was just taken for granted that black baseball players participated against other blacks only.

The person to whom I make reference was and is John Livingston. “Big John”, as some of us called him, could throw harder, run faster and hit a baseball further than anyone I had ever seen. I saw him only on special occasions such as “Negro Day” at the ball park or at a special game for black players only.

“Big John” was not disliked by any of the residents of the area. He was just a victim of his times. If he were a young man today, he would be playing baseball for big money, if he should choose to do so. And the people of Pennington Gap and Lee County would be cheering for him.

Thanks, Big John, for providing this old baseball fan with some of his most memorable moments. *Clyde Orr*

Seeing Them On The Way Up!

One of the exciting moments for every baseball fan is to tell when they saw a player at the major league level who roamed center field in some long ago minor league game or won a two-hit shutout pitcher’s battle.

For Lee County baseball fans there have been opportunities to see some of baseball’s greatest players early in their careers.

Johnny Podres, great Brooklyn Dodger pitcher, led the Hazard Bombers and the league with a 1.66 ERA in 1951, and struck out 228 batters.

Stan Musial, St. Louis Cardinals Hall of Famer, played for Williamson in the Mountain State League in 1938-39.

Denny McClain, Detroit Tigers pitcher, the last major league pitcher to win 30 games, played for Harlan, KY in the Appalachian League in 1962 and for Knoxville in the Sally League in 1963.

Darryl Strawberry, New York Mets star, played for Kingsport in the Appalachian League in 1980.

Coeburn, VA native son Tracy Stallard wrote his name into baseball immortality as he threw the pitch that Roger Maris rode into the record books on October 1, 1961. It was home run #61, breaking Babe Ruth’s historic record.

What major league stars did you see on their way up? Please drop us a line or an e-mail and share your story with others.

PENNINGTON GAP MINERS

1948	3rd Place	59-54	Buford Rhea , Mgr.
1949	5th Place	62-63	Wolfenbarger , Mgr.
1950	8th Place	44-82	Vince Pankovits, Mgr.
1951	5th Place	54-71	Vince Pankovits, Mgr.

In 1949 Kelly Lunn led the league in batting average (.358), hits (179) and rbi’s (126).

The Lonesome Pine Baseball League

If there is one entity that is more closely identified historically with coalfield baseball than the Lonesome Pine Baseball League it does not come quickly to mind. Almost eighty years ago a group of baseball enthusiasts took a major step to take organized baseball in Lee County and southwest Virginia to a high level. In the days to come we will see the league transition from a strictly amateur association to professional baseball. In this issue we shall read of those very beginning days.

The Beginning

POWELL VALLEY NEWS , VOLUME 12, NUMBER 14

SPRING 1932

Final arrangements were made for the functioning of the Lonesome Pine Baseball League, a strictly amateur organization, at a meeting held in Appalachia last Thursday night.

Scheduled games will start on April 16th, although the exact number of clubs entering the league has not been determined yet. The players may be available from three counties, Lee, Wise, and Scott and are to receive no compensation whatever except actual expenses of transportation and meals while away. A tentative schedule is now being arranged and will be announced at an early date.

An arbitration board of three members, R. P. Stewart, Pennington, John Fletcher, Appalachia, and R. S. Graham, Norton. All matters of protest will be settled by this board. They also have the power to draft players from a stronger club to strengthen a weaker club of the league.

Each team will be allowed to carry nineteen players the first three weeks, then reducing the number to thirteen.

Any team found guilty of using a paid player automatically forfeits all games in which the paid player participated.

The president of the league has the power to suspend any player or manager found guilty of unsportsmanship or disorderly conduct during a game.

The season shall be split in half, the winner of the first half playing the winner of the last half to determine who wins the championship.

All rained out or postponed games to be played off the next time the two teams meet. The president has power to set dates for all playoff games.

Just a few weeks later the following news item appeared in The Powell Valley News

From the news and earfuls that we hear of the "Lonesome Pine Baseball League" it seems that someone unintentionally extended the boundary line of Lee, Scott, and Wise counties to the central part of Kentucky by way of Brooklyn to Southwest Virginia by way of Roanoke to the two Carolinas, thence westwardly to the city of Nashville, Tenn, then back to Kentucky by way of Lynch, Ky, to a mining town in good old Southewest Virginia where the "Lonesome Pine Baseball League" was born.

The Rules of the Game

One of the most fascinating areas of baseball is the development of the Rules of the Game. It would not be an exaggeration to say that baseball in 2011 is an entirely different game than in 1845 when the first formal rules were written down. You will learn a lot, laugh often, and have an appreciation for a part of the game you may have never had.

THE BEGINNING (PART ONE)

The first published rules of baseball were published in 1845. Written by Alexander J. Cartwright they are commonly called the Knickerbocker Rules. The New York Base Ball Club was formed in 1845 and was known as the Knickerbocker Base Ball Club. (In the earliest days baseball was always written as two words.) There were twenty rules in the first edition. Here are the first six.

1. Members must strictly observe the time agreed upon for exercise and be punctual in their attendance.
2. When assembled for practice, The President, or Vice President in his absence, shall appoint an umpire, who shall keep the game in a book provided for that purpose, and note all violations of the By-laws and Rules during the time of exercise.
3. The presiding officer shall designate two members as Captains, who shall retire and make the match to be played, observing at the same time the players to be put opposite each other should be as nearly equal as possible; the choice of the two sides to be then tossed for, and the first in hand to be decided in a like manner.
4. The bases shall be from "home" to second base, 42 paces; from first to third base, 42 paces, equidistant. (The distance from home to second would have been 105 feet and the Cartwright basepaths would have been 74.25 feet.)
5. No stump match shall be played on a regular day of exercise.
6. If there should not be a sufficient number of members of the club present at the time agreed upon to commence exercise, gentlemen not members may be chosen in to make up the match, which shall not be broken up to take in members that may afterwards appear; but in all cases, members shall have the preference, when present at the making of the match.

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TO:

KEEPING THE MEMORIES ALIVE