

BASEBALL IN MANCHESTER, CT

By Brenda Paullo, for the Manchester Historical Society

Baseball has been a part of Manchester for almost 150 years. In 1905, Philip W. Hudson of Houston, Texas wrote this to the Mills Commission: "I remember that before the Civil War, I don't now remember how long, we played base ball at my home, Manchester, Hartford County, Connecticut. We had many clubs in Connecticut and I was President of one in Manchester, and also played with them."

Philip Hudson was a colonel in the Civil War and, with his brother Bill, owned and operated the Hudson Paper Mill in the Oakland section of Manchester, not far from today's Northwest Park. The mill used water power from the Hockanum River, which flows through Manchester on its way to the Connecticut River.

After the war Hudson organized a baseball team called the Hockanums. The players were from his mill and also from the Union Manufacturing Company, a huge cotton mill, also along the Hockanum River, and both in the North End of Manchester.

The team wore gray uniforms, blue socks and caps with blue visors. Both their belts and shirts bore the insignia **HOCKANUM**. They played on an open lot near the home of Judge Bowers between North Elm and Starkweather Streets.

On the other side of town in South Manchester was the Old Glorys team. It was formed and equipped by the Cheney Brothers Silk Mills and managed by James W. Cheney. The uniforms were red, white, and blue with an American flag on the shirtfront. The first game played between the two teams was won by the Old Glorys 35-20 but the Hockanums came back to win the return match 35-15.

In those early days both teams played in a tournament against East Hartford, South Windsor, Glastonbury, and Rockville. Legend has it that the Hockanums came out on top and the silver ball awarded to the winners later was given to Philip Hudson and traveled with him when he moved to Texas.

Baseball continued to be a favorite in Manchester with teams like the Monitors, the White Sox, and the Highland Park. As with today's Little League teams, some were sponsored by local businesses.

Among the early baseball players were Herbert Bowers, who captained the Yale University team and later became a judge and Tom Ferguson the future owner and publisher of *The Manchester Herald*, a local newspaper.

Professional players were also involved in town baseball. Because of a ban on Sunday games many of those players would look for local teams willing to pay them to play. Some of these pros played under their own names while others used an alias. The most famous professional involved in a Manchester game was probably Christy Mathewson from the New York Giants. Unfortunately, he pitched for arch-rival, Rockville, and Manchester lost the game. The Manchester-Rockville rivalry was so intense that businesses would shut down and crowds of 5,000 or more would attend the games.

The first Manchester player to make it to the big time was Herman Bronkie. He played between 1910 and 1922 for the Cleveland Naps, the Chicago Cubs, the St. Louis Cardinals and the St. Louis Browns. He later coached in Manchester and other Connecticut towns.

At least five other Silk City men played in the majors. Ulysses (Tony) Lupien grew up in Manchester and played on the high school team. He followed Jimmy Foxx at first base for the Boston Red Sox in 1942. Later in life he was the athletic director at Dartmouth and an outspoken observer of labor relations in baseball.

Moe Morhardt had a short-lived career with the Chicago Cubs in 1960. He played first base but lost out when the great Ernie Banks was shifted to that position. Tom Kelley pitched for the Cleveland Indians and won his first game against the NY Yankees. He suffered arm trouble but was able to come back with the Atlanta Braves both in the starting rotation and the bullpen.

Jay Johnstone played from 1966-1985 with teams in both the American and National Leagues primarily as an outfielder. In 1975 Phillies Manager, Danny Ozark said of Johnstone, "What makes him unusual is that he thinks he's normal and everyone else is nuts."

In 1938 Cheney Brothers leased the third floor of Mill Four to Meyer Tober for \$1500. The Tober Baseball Manufacturing Company made baseballs and other athletic equipment there until the company moved to Rockville in 1955. Tober also had a plant in the old Hilliard Mills on Hilliard Street.

Young baseball players were not forgotten. In 1923 the Manchester Midgets, a team of 11-16 year olds, advertised for opponents. Legion Baseball was started in 1931, suspended in 1939 and started again in 1945. The 1953 and 1958 teams were state champions.

Little League began in 1950 with one league and four teams with a total of 48 players. Games were played at Memorial Field now part of the Manchester High School campus. The Dodgers were the league champions that year.

Baseball has been played on a variety of fields, among them the Flower Street Stadium and Mt. Nebo. Today many of the schools have baseball diamonds. This tournament will be played at Dettore Field at Northwest Park which is home of the New England Collegiate Baseball League Silkworms and at Bagshaw Field located at Waddell School.

Ed Dettore was a long-time volunteer and friend of Little League baseball. Russell A. Bagshaw was a Little League player and Connecticut State trooper tragically slain in the line of duty.

For information about the Manchester Sports Hall of Fame and its award-winners, see Places to Visit/Sports Hall of Fame at www.manchesterhistory.org, the website of the Manchester Historical Society.

Brenda Paullo (1940-2010) retired in 2002 from the Manchester Board of Education, where she served as department head of speech and language. She conducted research and made presentations on genealogy and local history topics for the Manchester Historical Society.