

## BASEBALL: THE OLD DAYS

(Originally published July 1977)

A recent article in *Sports Illustrated* on Roger Marris brought back memories of baseball—the baseball that once was played more than fifty years ago. In 1961, Marris broke the old Babe Ruth record and, with Mantle batting behind him in the clean-up spot, made up half of the combination the Home Run Twins, which belted out a total of 115 homers that season. Marris' career in the lime-light was relatively short lived as compared to heroes like Ruth and DiMaggio, who preceded him and Mantle who outlasted him. But Marris and Mantle weren't even born fifty years ago.

My own baseball heroes were guys you never heard of, like "Deadpan" Bob Dowie, "Oyster Joe" Martina and Ollie Tucker. They used to play for the New Orleans Pelicans back in the 1920s, and they played in old Alex Heinemann's ballpark on the corner of Tulane and Carrollton Avenues next to the railroad tracks and the New Basin Canal where the Fontainebleau Hotel now stands. Alex was a crusty, cigar-smoking, elderly bachelor, a supposedly philanthropic gent who loved all children. He was especially fond of young boys wearing tight britches. After Alex died, they changed the name of his park to Pelican Stadium.

Anyway, in those days, unless you lived in one of the eleven major league cities, the real baseball heroes were those in your hometown, playing in a league like the old Class AA Southern Association or, over here in Georgia, the Sally League. Sure, we kept up with the majors and knew about the Indians and Senators, and about John McGraw's Giants or Connie Mack's Athletics, and the big stars like Tris Speaker, Ty Cobb, Babe Ruth, Walter "Big Train" Johnson, "Dizzy" Vance and Hank De Berry, but they were just sport page names of teams and players we read about but never saw unless they happened to come through town for a preseason exhibition with the local club. Radio broadcasting hadn't really started yet, and television wasn't even a dream, so we concentrated on what we had at home. And at home in New Orleans, we had the Pelicans.

Between 1921 and 1929, I must have gone to almost every Saturday and Sunday home game played in New Orleans, as well as one or two games each week whenever I could beg the money and get off from school in time. In between the hot dogs and the bags of popcorn and peanuts, and the scrambling after fouls in the grandstand to get my hands on a real "official" baseball, my dream was to become a batboy.

In the twenties, baseball was truly the Great National Pastime, and there wasn't much else on the sports scene from March through September to divert our interest. There were eight clubs in the old Southern League: New Orleans (Pelicans), Memphis (Chickasaws), Atlanta (Crackers), Birmingham (Barons), Nashville (Volunteers), Chattanooga (Look-outs), Little Rock (Travelers), and Mobile (Bears). Opening day was

always a big occasion, and there was stiff competition between the bigger cities to see who could draw the biggest crowd and win the attendance trophy. The paid attendance figure was usually, with only a little cheating, somewhere between 14,000 and 20,000 on that day, and Heineman Park's grandstand and bleachers were always jammed full, as were the temporary bleachers and roped-off standing-room areas that lined the fences and encircled the outfield.

The local triumvirate of sports editors, Bill Keefe of the *Times-Picayune*, Fred Digby of the *Item*, and Harry Martinez of the *States*, stayed busy at their typewriters day after day, pouring out reams of copy about baseball—and Southern League baseball in particular. In fact, they had a kind of Southern writer's league going and competed, not only among themselves but also against their rival counterparts in other big Southern League towns—especially Freddie Russell in Nashville, "Zipp" Newman in Birmingham, Ed Danforth and Ralph McGill in Atlanta—to see who could pound out the most vivid prose or hurl the sharpest barbs.

Minor league baseball was different then. For one thing, the line-ups never varied much from year to year. Most of the regulars were old-timers who had been up to the majors once or twice and were back home playing their accustomed positions; old pros who knew the ropes and played a good, steady brand of ball. There were always a couple of rookies around each year, but generally they had a hard time breaking into the line-up. When they did break in, they became instant favorites with the fans, but, because of their youth, their potential and the obvious talent it took to bench an old-timer, they were usually quickly spotted by scouts and snatched up into Triple A or Major League ball. They didn't stay around too long.

So, opening day of any season was like a real homecoming. The same fans were there, usually in the same seats; and the same players were there, usually in their same positions. The same, leather-lunged announcer, with his same big, brown megaphone was standing on home plate calling out the line-ups. The colored bleachers (the "coal-bin"), along the left foul line, were packed with shiny black faces and white straw hats and the white bleachers (the "peanut gallery"), in the hot sun along the right field foul line, were filled with its usual red-faced, boozy hecklers. Pelican manager, Larry Gilbert, came out and doffed his cap, and in the bottom of the first was mincing back and forth along the third base coaching line with his peculiar, sprung-legged gait. "Oyster Joe" Martina was on the mound, and "Deadpan" Bob Dowie, with the usual wad of tobacco bulging out his cheek, was behind the plate. "Snake" Henry was at first, "Cotton" Knapp at second, Ray Gardner at short, and "Chuck" Deal at third. In the outfield, either "Dutch" Hoffman or Frank Rose was in left, Sammy Vick or Jim Blakely was in center, and, always, in right field, that durable, perennial favorite, Ollie Tucker. The fans felt they were part of the family.

Oh, there were others, too, during the Twenties: Pete Lapan, the spindly-legged catcher who took over when Dowie's arthritis flared up, Buddy Myer, "Country" Davis, and Roy "Shorty" Weatherly, around the infield; and then some younger ones who broke into the line-up for a few months, like "Pinky" Whitney at third base who went up to Detroit and a couple of hard-hitting first basemen (both local boys): Eddie Morgan who went to the Indians and Zeke "Bananas" Bonura who went to the Senators. Zeke seldom made a fielding error, but then he considered that any batted ball more than six feet away from the bag was somebody else's worry. It was only the pitching staff who constantly changed, except, of course, for "Oyster Joe" who stayed on forever (he had already been up and back) and who, even in his failing years, could occasionally pull off an iron man stunt and pitch both ends of a double header. The rest of the pitchers were either too good to stay long, or so bad they soon were traded.

Except for the first basemen, all the long ball hitters played the outfield. The infielders, as the saying went, "couldn't hit the side of the Customhouse." Ollie Tucker was everybody's hero, a sandy haired, unflappable ball hawk and crowd pleaser who always hit over 350. Even the bleacherites loved him. Bob Dowie, who never batted over 180 in his lifetime, was also a favorite; his specialty was getting hit by pitched balls. Old Bob was expert at ducking what must have been an ironclad left shoulder into slow curves. When Gilbert put him in to pinch hit, everyone knew what was coming. In particular, and like a well-rehearsed morality play, "Dead pan" trotting off to first base rubbing his shoulder always brought those three arch villain managers, "Doc" Prothro of the Chicks, Johnny Dobbs of the Barons, and Bert Niehaus of the Crackers, charging out of the dug-out to scream at the umpire while the fans roared their boos.

Well, that was baseball to me in the old days. And it will never be the same again. The Pelicans are no more; there hasn't been a baseball team in New Orleans for years now. Old Alex Heineman, with his cigar, straw hat, white tie and horseshoe diamond stickpin, is long gone, and Heineman Park, his park, on the corner of Tulane and Carrolton, has disappeared along with the railroad tracks and the New Basin Canal. Most of the old-timers are dead or in nursing homes. But the next time you're in New Orleans and staying at the Fontainebleau, if you happen to hear running footsteps, commotion and shouting in the corridor outside your door, don't worry; it's just the ghost of old Ollie Tucker chasing that long fly ball, trapping it against the right field boards, and the bleachers going wild.

(c) *The Bulletin of the Muscogee County (Georgia) Medical Society*, "The Doctor's Lounge", Jul 1977, Vol. XI Vol 7, p.13