BASEBALL FEVER

EARLY BASEBALL IN MICHIGAN

PETER MORRIS

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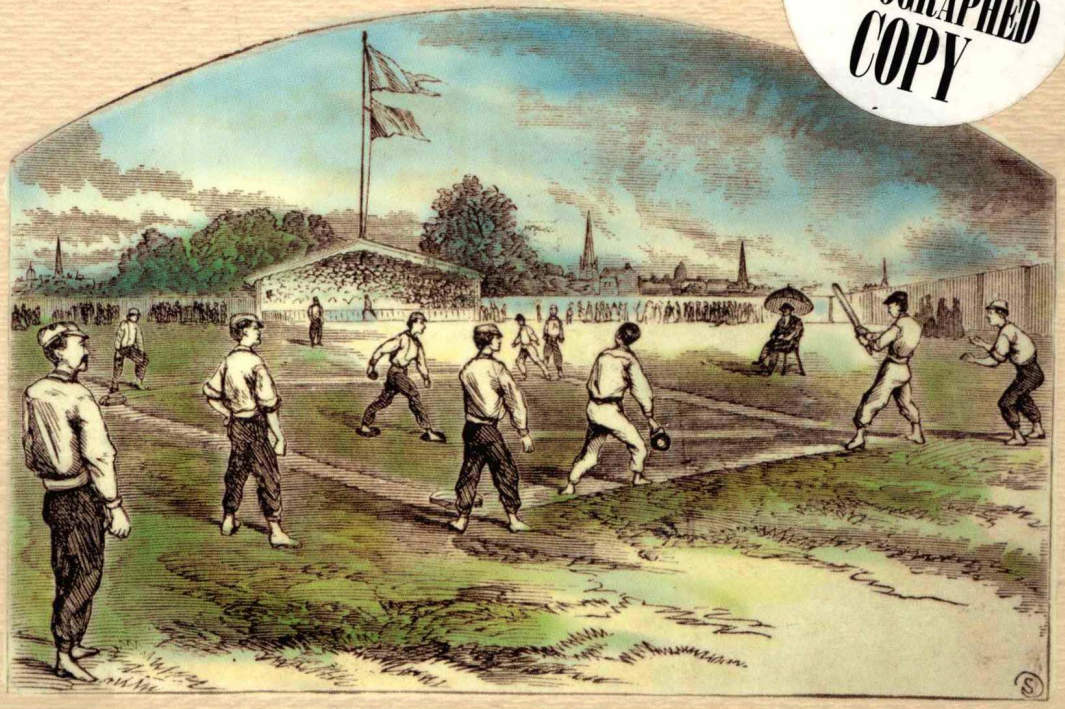

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BASEBALL
FEVER

To my mother, Dr. Ruth Rittenhouse Morris (1933–2001)

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INTRODUCTION

Melville McGee, by then a prominent judge in Jackson, Michigan, reminisced in 1892 about the so-called raisin' games of his boyhood in rural Concord, Michigan. While no dates are specified, McGee was born in 1828, so it must have been in the late 1830s or early 1840s that these games of what was then called "base ball" took place.[1] McGee recalled that "the raising of a framed house or barn was an event that called together the entire neighborhood, and it was very seldom that any one invited to assist on such an occasion failed to be present. The event was looked forward to by the boys of the neighborhood with great satisfaction, as it gave them a half holiday from the labors of the farm and enabled them to enjoy a game of base ball after the building had been raised."

After the work was done, all joined in a hearty meal. Then, "the next thing in order was to select a good place and two of the young men chose sides and they played ball until it was time to go to their several houses. It seems to me now as I look back and recall those early days that the young people enjoyed their sports and games and entered into them with far more zest than young people do at the present day. There was no feeling of envy or superiority, or the feeling that you don't belong to my set. All were on a level, and everyone was just as good as any other."[2]

The nostalgia implicit in Judge McGee's reminiscences will sound familiar to modern readers, as every new generation of base-

ball fans feels the need to grumble that the game has become a business and is no longer played for the love of it as it was when they were children. In reality, baseball has been a business to the players since the 1860s.[3] In most instances, what such speakers are actually articulating is the unpleasant shock of recognizing that the same game they played for fun as children can provide a livelihood for a select few, but not for them.

Such sentiments also tap into the deeper reality that baseball is at heart a country boy's game that was fundamentally changed when it moved to the city. It is as though modern baseball fans who express their disillusionment possess a collective memory of the scene McGee describes. Or perhaps they are simply remembering the carefree days of their own childhoods. Either way, they are demonstrating an essential truth about the course of baseball history.

Judge McGee's belief that there had been a change in the way baseball was played and experienced was not merely rose-tinted nostalgia. His contention that the notion of superiority was a later addition to the game-playing ethos is a reality confirmed by modern sports historians. Historian Melvin L. Adelman concludes that "competition was often viewed as socially dysfunctional in premodern America" and that only with the rise of industrialism between 1820 and 1870 did "Americans firmly come to accept competition as a valued mechanism for achieving social progress."[4] As we shall see, no one witnessed this very real transformation in the way baseball was played more closely than did McGee.

McGee's account provides a particularly poignant description of the sense of belonging and community created by the pioneer lifestyle. This feeling of belonging extended naturally to ball-playing because all the players were equal participants—there were no spectators unless by choice. These half-holidays earned by honest toil were a celebration of a shared work ethic, and McGee understandably believed that a bond had been severed when changes in the way the game was played began to limit participation. Perhaps of all the changes necessitated by baseball's growth, the most fundamental one came when the game began to exclude many from participating—never again would "everyone [be] just as good as any other."

Nonetheless, modern baseball fans still feel a strong sense of belonging, in spite of being excluded from firsthand participation in the game. William Freedman's *More Than a Pastime: An Oral History of Baseball Fans* documents how fans have cultivated a new sense of belonging to replace the one that comes from playing. A fan identified as Sanford S., who grew up in the 1950s, recalls that "baseball was part of the beautiful romantic world I was excluded from, but only as a player. As a fan . . . it gave me a warm and wonderful sense of belonging and acceptance."[5] Sanford continues: "Lots of things seemed out of reach. But not baseball. Baseball was within reach, and it was part of a world I wanted to belong to. . . .

Judge Melville McGee (*seated*) began playing baseball as a boy in the 1830s and scored the tying run in the grand Detroit tournament of 1867. But controversy swirled around the club he represented, and McGee later wrote with sadness that the game was no longer played with the same spirit he remembered. *Courtesy of the Ella Sharp Museum*

Anybody could tune in, and when you did you joined all the others who were tuning in, all those neighbors sitting on their porches. . . . That was a world I could be a part of."[6]

Another fan named Bennett K. could have been responding directly to McGee. He describes attending a game at Fenway Park as "a return to an agrarian ideal where everyone has a chance to achieve the American Dream, where everyone gets a piece of land. At a ball game we all get to share this piece of land for two-and-a-half, three hours." He also comments on how complete strangers feel drawn to share memories: "I loved that kind of buzzy friendliness. It's a return to community, to small town agrarian life where everybody knew everybody or felt friendly even towards people they didn't know."[7] How is it that baseball managed to change so dramatically from the days of "raisin' games" without losing this sense of belonging?

This book will trace that quite astonishing development in the still primarily rural state of Michigan from the mid-1850s through the mid-1870s. Precisely because Michigan was never at the forefront of baseball's development, examining how its residents first became passionate about the game will help us understand a vital and forgotten part of baseball's history. While baseball first caught on as an adult activity in New York City, the country's big cities have produced countless fads that soon died because they had no appeal in the Midwest. Only when baseball became established in the country's heartland did it truly become the national pastime.

NOTES

1. Following current conventions, *baseball* will be spelled as one word in this book. During the period covered by this book, however, the term *base ball* was in common usage.
2. Melville McGee, "The Early Days of Concord, Jackson County, Michigan," 430.
3. Robert F. Burk's *Never Just A Game* offers an excellent account of the development of baseball as a business.
4. Melvin L. Adelman, *A Sporting Time*, 285.
5. William Freedman, *More Than a Pastime: An Oral History of Baseball Fans*, 161.
6. Freedman, *More Than a Pastime*, 162.
7. Freedman, *More Than a Pastime*, 164. "Bennett K." was born in 1950.

1

"The Good Old Days When the Result Was Merely a Question of Physical Endurance and Light"

Sporting activities understandably played a limited role in early America. A culture imbued with such a strong work ethic, and with plenty of "hacking and hewing" to keep it busy, had little need to devise new challenges.[1] Numerous accounts by British tourists in the 1830s and 1840s noted that Americans seemed obsessed with work, to the exclusion of recreation.[2]

Activities like hunting, fishing, and horseback riding were naturally viewed as means of survival, rather than as contests of skill. Early settlers in Michigan encountered a particularly harsh landscape, and creating diversions was hardly a priority. As one of Michigan's early pioneers later remembered, "In those days, amusements were scarce, and work was the steady employment of old and young."[3]

Nonetheless, by the 1830s the modern world was making rapid incursions into the traditional rhythms of American life. As early as 1839 the *Farmer's Almanack* wrote that "scarcely a tool . . . has not been altered for the better in some way or other."[4] These advances not only helped the farmer in the field and the farmer's wife in the kitchen; often they lured the couple's children to the cities to follow

new careers. Around two-thirds of the population still farmed in 1840, but that percentage was slowly and steadily dropping.[5]

Travel was becoming a major part of Americans' lives. New roads were being built everywhere, while steamboats and trains would soon make the country seem much smaller. In the generation since Lewis and Clark's expedition, more and more of the continent had been "civilized"—wildernesses chopped down, wild beasts slain, and native people forcibly relocated by government policy. Suddenly, states like Michigan were no longer considered suitable only for pioneers, fur traders, and "that class who 'leave their country for their country's good.'"[6] A much wider cross-section of Americans began to catch the "western fever."

These changes meant that time for leisure activities gradually became available even to working men. Ironically, it was the setting aside of the Sabbath as a day of rest that made this most conspicuously evident. While other members of the family were content with a respite from their labors, the excess energy of boys needed some kind of outlet. One Michigan pioneer, Bela Hubbard, recalled: "On Sundays, parents and daughters rode to church in a sober, jog-trot style, on a cart drawn by a single pony, while boys raced on their nags, and returned in the grand style, racing, with whoop and hurrah! . . . In winter these races were exchanged for trotting matches on the ice, in their light home-made carry-alls. Long and eager were the contests for superior speed and skill."[7]

Ball sports were not uncommon, but they remained disorganized. The many settlers from the British Isles imported cricket, but that sport's already well-developed rules and customs were singularly ill-suited to channeling the energies of young boys. A proper match lasted most of a day and was limited to twenty-two participants, many of whom remained inactive for long periods. Cricket was thus best suited for those long on attention span and short on energy, hardly a description of young boys at any time.

More successful was the British game of rounders, a much less formal bat and ball game. Rounders and similar games that went by such names as *round ball, town ball, one old cat, two old cat, barn ball,*

field base, patch ball, stool ball, feeder, and even *base ball* or *bass ball* were popular in America in the 1830s and 1840s. These games involved some of the essential elements of baseball—hitting, fielding, and base running—but lacked many of the modern game's complexities. They were far more flexible than cricket, being adaptable to any number of participants, not necessarily dividing the players into teams, and making every player at least potentially part of the action on every play.

The most detailed surviving account of a pre-1840 game resembling baseball describes one played on June 4, 1838, in Beachville, Upper Canada. This account was not written until nearly fifty years later, and since its author was seven or eight when the game was played, the precision with which he recalls details must be considered suspicious.[8] But even with some possibly spurious elements added, the Beachville game sounds as much like tag or dodge ball as baseball. The game featured five "byes" (bases), with the first bye placed a mere six yards from home in order to "get the runners on the base lines, so as to have the fun of putting them out or enjoying the mistakes of the fielders when some fleet footed fellow would dodge the ball and come in home."[9]

A Boston baseball journal gives a similar account of the loose structure of the predecessors of regulation baseball: "The game of ball . . . has been for years a favorite sport with the youth of the country, and long before the present style of playing was in vogue, round ball was indulged in to a great extent all over the land, whiling away many an hour of the school boy's holiday. Who of our readers does not recollect the ball games of their school days with the convenient trees, posts and pumps for bounds (no bases in those days), the distance not alike between any two, and instead of two sides of nine men each, half the time, five, would suffice for a game, with one at the bat, a catcher out, giver and a chaser or two, the fun would continue for hours."[10] In a society that placed great emphasis on the distinction between manliness and childishness, this loose structure created a damning perception of baseball as a juvenile diversion.

One of the earliest ball-playing clubs composed of men was the Olympic Ball Club of Philadelphia, which evoked a mixture of amusement and scorn when it began playing town ball in 1833:

> The first day that the Philadelphia men took the field . . . only four men were found to play, so they started in by playing a game called cat ball. All the players were over 25 years of age, and to see them playing a game like this caused much merriment among the friends of the players. It required "sand" in those days to go out on the field and play, as the prejudice against the game was very great. It took nearly a whole season to get men enough together to make a team, owing to the ridicule heaped upon the players for taking part in such childish sports.[11]

Another account of this club recalls that some players would go over to Camden, New Jersey, to play ball, "the prejudice against wasting time in that way being very prevalent in the Quaker city [Philadelphia] of that period."[12] Clearly, men in 1830s America were expected to have better things to do with their time than participate in the games of small boys, and their society discouraged such activities.

Who deserves the credit for reinventing this child's game as an adult activity? One claimant who can conclusively be dismissed is Abner Doubleday. The game in Cooperstown was played by small boys and was not an advance on earlier versions. As explained in appendix A, there are still many misconceptions about the Doubleday story.

The much-ridiculed Philadelphians were not the only adults who tried to form a ball-playing club prior to 1840. A recently discovered 1823 article describes "witnessing a company of active young men playing the manly and athletic game of 'base ball'" in what is now Greenwich Village.[13] A club formed in Rochester, New York, around 1825 numbered nearly fifty members ranging in age from eighteen to forty.[14] But if these clubs introduced any innovations, the evidence is now lost in the murky past.