

Baraboo Pioneered Baseball in 1866

By Bill Schuette and Bob Dewel

“Play ball!” Those words may have first echoed across the Baraboo hills in the summer of 1866. According to archival records, the newly organized Baraboo Base Ball Club played its first games around that time.

Before 1857, the game of baseball had been exclusively played in the New York area. However, after the Civil War ended in 1865, the game had spread to the Midwest and the newly-defeated South, and into most of America’s largest cities. Troops returning from the war brought the game with them, having learned it from their comrades at arms to the East.

An article in the *Baraboo Daily News* dated June 25, 1925, tells the story of Baraboo’s first baseball team. The author of that piece had interviewed several of the early players.

A man named George Dodd organized this first team, having learned the game while living out east, and is credited with being the father of Baraboo’s first Base Ball team.

“The foremost idea with George,” noted the article “was to win the game. His playing was not particularly intended for the benefit of the grandstand, and the applause apparently meant nothing to him.” His primary satisfaction was to have the boys “get it right.”

The layout of the field was very similar to those of today, however a few changes to the game have taken place over the past century and a half, as noted in the article.

“The first change that was made allowed [the pitcher] to throw the ball, provided his hand did not pass above the knee, and this was known as underhand throwing.” Later he would be allowed the height of the hip, then the shoulder and finally to throw as he saw fit.

Early balls were made mostly of rubber which accounted for longer fly balls and more home-runs. Games would last many hours because scoring runs could escalate to 40 or 50. So in order to alleviate the problem, they eliminated most or all of the rubber. That, however, left the outfielders with little to do, as the ball seldom made it that far. A compromise was reached where a little rubber was placed at the center of the ball, solving the problem.

There were no factory-made bats in those early days. The article goes on to say: “The bats were all home made, and were mostly turned out at the upper Baraboo mills.... Usually each individual had his own favorite bat, made according to his own specifications, and they all varied considerably in length, diameter, heft and material.”

Uniforms were scarce in the early days of baseball; however, the Baraboo team was fortunate and sported jerseys which were a patriotic red, white and blue.

Those early games were played on a diamond located west of the courthouse, about where the library stands today. Another field was located on the east end of town, between Mound and 2nd Streets, near Elizabeth. “No timber grew on it, but it was covered with a luxuriant growth of June grass which was always cropped short by the large heard of town cows, which at the time enjoyed free range,” noted the article.

Hot disputes, then, as today, often times interrupted the games. “These disputes usually waxed hot and eloquent, and sometimes even looked serious,” noted the writer. There were no



Baseball from Baraboo
Baseball Club 1866-69

Uniform and Hat
Baraboo Baseball Club
1866

Photos courtesy William
Peterson, Baseball Hall of
Fame, Cooperstown, N.Y



umpires then to cool tempers, so it was usually up to the two captains and their teams to settle any disputes. “Even the spectators were at liberty to ‘butt in,’ and all this only added to the uproar and confusion.” After the “storm had spent its fury,” everyone returned to the field and the game resumed as though nothing had happened.

By 1876, teams from surrounding towns, such as Portage, Lodi, and Mauston, were playing in regional tournaments. Players had to get up early and travel the unimproved roads of the day. They would arrive on horseback, in buggies, and some even on the newly emerging railroad system.

Baraboo may have had one of the first integrated teams in the community. During one of the playoff games, it was noted that, “Mr. Noyes pitched both games very effectively and the catching was done by a colored Pullman porter named Johnson, who was surely an artist behind the bat.” Catchers, in those days, had little or no protection, so to keep from being hit they had to depend entirely on their agility to dodge the speeding ball.

At the completion of a game, it was customary to have both teams line up facing each other. When they were ready, the captain of the home team would step out and shout, “Three cheers for the visiting nine!” The opposing team would respond in like fashion. After many of the games, a dance was hosted by the home team.

While researching this article, it was discovered that a baseball, jersey, cap, and possibly a bat, from this early 1866 team still exists, having been donated to the National Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, N.Y. in 1939. According to their archival records, these are the oldest items in their collection of this kind known to have survived from those early days of baseball.

“The uniforms are extremely fragile,” noted Peter Clark, registrar of the Hall. “The oldest uniform in the collection belonged to a member of the Baraboo Base Ball Club of Baraboo, Wis., and has held together since 1866.”

The game of baseball has gone on to become one of America’s favorite pastimes, and Baraboo can be proud of the fact that it was part of that adventure.

(940 words)Editor: Permission was granted from the Baseball Hall of Fame to reproduce the attached 2 images.