

Summary of Professional Ball in Mattoon, Illinois

At three separate times in the history of Mattoon, baseball lovers stepped forward with their time, money and labor to bring a professional team to the city. Each time, a group of men who loved the game took the financial risks to bring regional fame and good baseball to Mattoon. The community initially supported the efforts with attendance and subscriptions to stock, but as the teams began to lose, the flame went out. Each club had to close due to financial pressures. Each professional effort lasted longer than the one before it; the first was for two years, the second for almost four years, and the last attempt succeeded for ten years.

Around the turn of the 20th century, baseball skyrocketed to the forefront of American pastimes. Leagues were popping up everywhere, especially here in the Midwest. The first three professional teams in Mattoon were part of this expansion. A stock company or syndicate was formed in March 1898 to encourage base ball in Mattoon and to build a park in the south part of town at what is now 18th and Oak Streets. They called themselves the Athletic Park Club, Inc. The club manager was F. M. Menke, a future mayor and local restaurant owner. Other directors of the corporation were Bryan H. Tivnen, Seth R. Evans, J. Frank Robinson, and Samuel M. Owings. Admission to the games varied from twenty-five cents to free, depending on where you sat and if you were female (they got in free). The team they fielded in 1898 was an independent one with no league affiliation though most of the players were hired from other cities and states.

In December 1898, it was decided that Mattoon would be in a league the following year; despite the fact the prior season had not been a financial success. The 1898 independent team, made up of men hired from all over the U.S., had been strong enough to impress other towns that would also be in the league. The Athletic Park Club, Inc. had to increase their capital stock to get the money to join the newly formed, Illinois-Indiana League. The other teams were: Danville, Muncie, Kokomo, Bloomington, IN, Crawfordsville, Terre Haute, and Wabash. Despite some local complaints about Sunday games, the team played almost every day of the week. At the end of the season, Mattoon believed that it had won the pennant. The Mattoon team (no nickname was given) was always first or second in ranking throughout the season. They played 72 games and won 50, leaving them with a .694 percentage. However, much to the community's sadness, the pennant was awarded to Danville in November.

The 1898-99 teams were comprised of exceptional ball players, nine or ten of the men who played at some point during the season ended up in the major leagues. These future major leaguers were: Luther "Dummy" Taylor who was a deaf and mute man, Roy Brashear, "Del" Howard, "Pug" Bennett, "Nick" Carter, Bob Wicker, "Deacon" McGuire, Weldon Henley, Harry Spratt and possibly the famous Cy Young. Despite a winning season and this outstanding talent, the team was not renewed in 1900 because it had not been financial success. The paper wondered, "It is difficult to understand why the game has not paid here for it has been played in its most attractive form and lovers of the sport have seen as good and as interesting contests as few minor cities have an opportunity to see."

The second attempt at a professional team began in 1905 and was spearheaded by the Mattoon City Railway Company that ran the interurban line. They built an amusement park between Mattoon and Charleston; today it would be on the north side of the Charleston Country Club. In 1904 when the park opened, a Mattoon-controlled team played at the park, however, in 1905 the streetcar company took over the stock and owned the team. Manager, Joe Adams, brought in players from all over the region. The Mattoon Colts had a fairly good season, but ended on a losing streak. The following year, the management decided to enter the team in the Kentucky-Indiana-Tennessee or Kitty League. John Berryhill from Indiana was hired as the manager/player; he was paid \$150 for the season. Fred More from Charleston was the managing owner. The fans dubbed the team the Mattoon-Charleston Canaries, after the broomcorn cutters that flooded the area each fall.

The Kitty League included Paducah, Kent., Cairo, Jacksonville, Danville, and Vincennes. Teams had to travel almost 4,000 miles during the season. The team salary limit was \$1,000 per month and the league fee was \$400. Mattoon was firmly behind this team despite the fact that it represented both the county seat and the west-side town. The Journal-Gazette put out badge buttons that declared it was the place for "base ball news." The highest attendance at the games was over 1,000 in late May to see a Canary – Cairo game. However, at one game "there was a total of one (1) paid admission from Charleston at the game Friday, and as that individual was Col. Alderman Robert Howard, master in chancery of Coles county, formerly an alderman and citizen of Mattoon who could hardly be called a genuine blown-in-the-bottle Charlestonian. No wonder the ball team should be called 'Mattoon.'" The Canaries did not rank well in the league, having pretty much a losing season. Though, six men who had played for them sometime during the summer later went on to the major leagues.

The Kitty League fell apart as they tried to organize for the 1907 season. And the interurban company decided to relinquish ownership of the team to stock companies. The Canary's management felt that the joint Mattoon-Charleston team had not drawn well in 1906; they suspected one reason was that it did not allow the natural rivalry between the two towns to bloat the attendance. So they turned the Urban Park field over to a Charleston-only team and gave the baseball equipment to a new stock company in Mattoon, the Mattoon Ball Club. Mattoon struggled to raise the \$1500 needed to enter the new Eastern Illinois League. Baseball supporters canvassed the city asking for people to subscribe to the stock for \$10. They finished just in time for the season, incorporating on April 20th. D. Stewart Campbell, a local undertaker, was chosen as president of the Mattoon Ball Club. Other directors were: Frank Dolan, Sid Katz, Dr. B. D. Parrish, Dudley Kingman, James Harris, and Frank Heermans, secretary/treasurer

The group passed on an offer from the interurban company for free land and leased a part of the Shea farm on the east end of town about a mile east of Logan Street on today's Rt. 316. The interurban agreed to charge five cents for a ride to the new ballpark from downtown Mattoon. A new diamond had to be built from scratch, which taxed the groups fundraising once again, but they eventually raised the \$2,000. The field, bleachers and grandstand were built for this price using 40,000 feet of lumber. The grandstand could seat 700, the bleachers sat 300 and the sidelines viewing areas could accommodate 100 vehicles and/or another 2000 fans, making the total possible admission 3,000 people. In 1908, the interurban company moved the Mattoon 33rd Street station to the property so fans could wait for trains in shelter. Advance tickets were purchased at the interurban station for thirty-five cents that included ten cents for transportation.

There were six teams in the league. Besides Mattoon, Shelbyville, Pana, Charleston, Taylorville, and Centralia fielded teams in 1907. In 1908, the league expanded to eight teams including: Taylorville, Danville, Shelbyville, Charleston, Paris, Vincennes, Pana and Mattoon. They played 120 games during each season. The first schedule was made by George Rice of Mattoon, who won \$25 for his plan in a contest sponsored by the League directors. The name, Mattoon Candidates was chosen from over 40 ideas submitted from the fans. The winner came from George Stites who said "Mattoon is a great center for politics and furnishes as many candidates as any place, and as our team is to be the best and supply candidates for bigger leagues" the name was appropriate.

Under the management of "Hank" Charles J. O'Day from Decatur, a strong team was formed. The players included deaf men and an Oneida Indian. Mattoon did not do well the first half of the season, so they recruited new players and eventually won the pennant for 1907. 1908 was a different story guided by two managers, Red Russell and later William Johnstone. A rainy spring and summer caused several games to be cancelled and the team could not seem to win. The Candidates hovered around the middle of the standings with a .300-.400 percentage.

The losing season and financial strains of cancelled or low attended games was the death knell for the team. In addition, the league was not very stable; two towns pulled out and had to be replaced by mid-July. Other recreational options, including traveling by car and movies, were also putting pressure on base ball all over the United States. The team folded in early August heavily in debt to the players (\$390), the lumber company (\$400), and many other creditors and lenders. Charleston withdrew at the

same time, which further destabilized the league. Shelbyville pulled out in mid-August and the Eastern Illinois League never finished the 1908 season.

After World War II, baseball again dominated American culture. Minor leagues were springing up everywhere. The last and most successful pro team in Mattoon was sponsored by the Mattoon Athletic Association; formed in 1947 by William Zurheider, Clyde Kirk and Charles E. Heath. The original expectation was to issue 250 shares of stock for \$100 each. But within three months they amended the corporation to issue 600 shares of stock at the same price. Despite constant financial struggles, partially due to building a new ballpark at DeWitt and Logan Streets, they managed to keep the team until 1957.

Over the ten years, the team name, the league and the major league affiliation changed several times. The first team was the Mattoon Indians with the Illinois State League, affiliated with the White Sox. In 1948, they affiliated with the Cleveland Indians. The Illinois League evolved into the Mississippi-Ohio Valley League in 1949 though the team name and affiliation remained the same until 1951. The '51 Indians team was independent. In 1952 they affiliated with the Cincinnati Reds, and in 1953 through 1956 they were with the Philadelphia Phillies and called themselves the Mattoon Phillies. The final year the team was called the Mattoon Athletics and was affiliated with the Kansas City team. The MOV League evolved into the Midwest League, which still exists today. A group of these professional players holds a reunion each August here in Mattoon.

Like the earlier leagues, the cities included were rated for both their ability to support a team and for the distance between cities. The Illinois State League, founded by Mattoon's Charlie Heath, included Belleville, Centralia, Mount Vernon, West Frankfort, and Marion. The change to the Mississippi-Ohio Valley League came when Marion's franchise was moved to Paducah, Kentucky. Vincennes, Springfield, Danville, Decatur, Paris, Clinton, Lafayette, Dubuque, Kokomo and Hannibal all were members of the MOV at sometime. Mattoon was the only one of the original MOV teams to last throughout that league's history. When Mattoon left the Midwest League, the other cities were Clinton, Decatur, Lafayette Dubuque, Kokomo, Michigan City and Paris.

Life in this modern minor league was not very glamorous, though the professional players were much admired by the local community. The men traveled by bus, train or station wagon to the rival towns and spring training. They were not paid the large salaries of today's major leaguers. In fact

The Mattoon Fans Club was incorporated in February 1950 by Carl Lenz, W.K. Kidwell and Maynard Paul Graham. It's purpose was to both support the local class D team and to be an educational umbrella for the establishment of Little League teams. One of their first activities was to host a Baseball Jamboree at the High School. The guests of honor were Stan Musial and Harry Caray. The event was to raise money for the MAA and the Fans Club, and to kick off the new Little League. The activities of the Fans Club helped extend the life of the team through all the financial problems.