



Buffalo Tales



Volume 17, No. 5 Buffalo County Historical Society September-October, 1994

KEARNEY'S "BOYS OF SUMMER" — THE 1946 IRISHMEN PART II

by Gary Stickney

The summer of 1946 possessed the ideal ingredients for a "dream season." As previously mentioned there was a "changing of the guard" in leadership, although the excellent "old guard" was present with advice and support. At age 27, Floyd Stickney possessed twenty plus years of baseball experience which included a four year stint in professional baseball and a natural competitive personality. By the end of the year Stickney had managed the Irishmen to 26 wins in 33 ballgames, and climaxed the season with a series win over Tekamah for the "little world series" title of Nebraska.



Floyd Stickney
Player Manager

As playing manager, Stickney also led the league in hitting with an average of .492.

Leadership wasn't the only change made in 1946. A new ballpark was built to replace the old fairgrounds field. The new park was designed after a field Floyd Stickney had played on in Albany, Georgia. On Sunday, June 2, the new baseball field was dedicated. It was to be called Memorial Field in honor of the servicemen who fought during W.W. II. Sportswriter Howard Baxter noted in his column that the infield was well groomed and clean and would be sodded in the fall and that the outfield grass, although not fully grown out was "coming along nicely" and "will suffice to keep the dust down and give the contestants solid footing." Although there was only temporary seating for this first game, Mr. Baxter indicated "There will be bleacher space for about 700 to 800 fans . . . There is room for a crowd of 5,000 or more on the hillsides of the natural amphitheatre in which the park sets, so bring along blankets and cushions . . ." Nearly 1,500 fans attended the game. This was a sign of things to come.

(Continued on Page 3)

WITH THE SOCIETY

A NOTE FROM THE PRESIDENT:

The Buffalo County Historical Society Board is continually working to preserve the history of Buffalo County. We have made contact with the City of Kearney for some of the old street bricks in Kearney Centre that are to be removed. We would like to use them to provide more walkways on the museum grounds.

The wagon barn is nearing completion and we have set Saturday, October 15th at 8:00 a.m. for moving the items from the storage area near UNK. We need help in moving these items and would like to have as many as possible come to garage #16 located at 1701 University Drive west of the old power plant.

The Board is also seriously thinking about a new building on the grounds to house the artifacts we continue to receive and to provide space for the Archives Committee and their research activity. We are certainly running out of room for all of these items. Maybe this would be something some of you would like to help with this winter and next spring. We would welcome any ideas or donations. We will keep you posted.

LARRY K. NANSEL, President

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Mrs. Maxine Schroeder of Shelton, who died on September 18, was a former president of the Buffalo County Historical Society. She had served eight years as a director, two years as vice president and two years as president. She has a wide knowledge of the history of the Wood River Center, later Shelton, area of Buffalo County. Maxine and her husband Fred were longtime life members, and have been supportive of the work of the Society since its reorganization in 1972. We extend sympathy to Fred, their two sons, and all of the family.

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MEMORIALS RECEIVED from

Alice Howell, in memory of Edna Basten Donald and of Maxine Schroeder.

Philip S. Holmgren, in memory of Edna Basten Donald and of Maxine Schroeder.

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MARK YOUR CALENDAR

WHAT: October Public Meeting of the Buffalo County Historical Society

WHERE: First State Bank of Shelton (lower Level)

WHEN: October 30, 1994 at 2:00 p.m.

TOPIC: "Transportation in the Platte Valley"



Memorial Field

Rarely would attendance fall below 1,000, and on some occasions it would exceed 3,000. Admission for adults was \$.50; children under 16 years of age were free.

Memorial Field was to get an added bonus. On Wednesday, August 14, the new field's lighting system was dedicated. The project was installed by the Giant Manufacturing Co., of Council Bluffs, Iowa, for \$7,600.00. Sixty units mounted on twelve poles created 180,000 watts of lighting which, by using larger lamps, was increased to 235,000 watts. The field was billed as being one of the best lighted fields in Nebraska. This initial lighting system served the park for nearly 40 years. By the time the grass infield was completed in 1947, Memorial Field was considered one of the best, if not the best field in Nebraska. That same field still serves Kearney today.

Another aspect of the 1946 season needs to be addressed before discussing the players, and that aspect is the sportswriting. Howard Baxter, who incidentally was a renowned softball pitcher in his own right, wrote a column entitled "The McCoy" for the Kearney Hub. Baxter, who had been writing sports for the Hub for nearly ten years, was a knowledgeable baseball man and a staunch supporter of the Irishmen, but more important he was a student of human nature and did an excellent job of capturing the personality of the individual players and projecting these personalities into the drama of Kearney baseball. Nicknames, cliches, and little personal insights always tempered with a sense of justice made Howard Baxter a favorite of fans and players, but his overriding concern was always with the truth. For example when an umpire was physically assaulted by a manager in Hastings and the umpire-in-chief refused to take charge of the situation, Baxter went directly to the rule book to point out his negligence without personally reprimanding the individual. When rhubarbs occasionally erupted on the field Baxter would always weigh both sides of the argument. He was not a finger pointer. His columns are invaluable to anyone who is interested in the Kearney sports scene in 1946-1947.



Kearney Irishmen 1947

Of course the players were the most important factor in that dream summer of '46. The roster for the 1946 Kearney Irishmen as it appeared on a typical scorecard is as follows:

5 Floyd Stickney	2 Bob Stickney	4 Marvin Higgins
11 Don Spangler	6 Enver Cleland	3 Tom Gaston
1 Gerald Peterson	John Keough (no number)	12 Bill Beasley
15 Ben Johnson	9 Jerry Grassmeyer	13 Mike Hollinger
10 Harvey Daake	14 Frank Johnson	

Floyd Stickney was working at the Kearney Airbase when he wasn't playing baseball. Bob Stickney, his younger brother, worked with the city's park and recreation program. Gerald Peterson was a postman. Brothers Ben and Frank Johnson were farmers, as were Harvey Daake, Enver Cleland, and Jerry Grassmeyer. Mike Hollinger was a barber. Most of the players had been playing baseball and softball for a number of years in the Kearney area. There were a few young ballplayers such as Grassmeyer and Don Rasmussen (who didn't appear on scorecard roster) who had played legion baseball in the area. The average age of the team was 28. This roster was expanded six games into the season with the addition of Ray Johnson. Although these players came from various backgrounds, they all had one common attribute — they loved to play baseball.

There is another member of this team who does not appear on this roster. His name is Roman Roh. Roh was a dental student at Creighton University who had once been a teammate of Floyd Stickney's in the Cardinal organization and is generally acknowledged as the outstanding pitcher in the Nebraska Independent League from 1946-1948. Roh was paid \$100 per game to pitch for the Irishmen. He usually pitched every Sunday. He would board the City of Denver on Saturday evening in Omaha, arrive in Kearney late Saturday night, check into a hotel room or stay with a Kearney player (usually Floyd Stickney), attend mass on Sunday morning; pitch the game, then board the 1:00 a.m. train back to Omaha. In 1946 Roh did this nine times before he lost a ballgame. In one stretch he pitched 65 consecutive scoreless innings.

Bob Stickney was Roh's 22-year-old catcher that 1946 season. In an interview 15 years later, after 25 years of catching in pro and semipro baseball, Stickney's immediate response to the question, best pitcher I ever caught? was "Roman Roh." Stickney was Roh's battery mate on a no-hitter and added, "I handled Roh in four one-hitters too." It is interesting to read accounts of Roh's pitching feats. These accounts usually make reference to the pitcher and catcher as a team. A good pitcher needed a good catcher.

Bob Stickney left the Irishmen after the '46 season to manage the Schuyler team in the Pioneer Nite League. Interestingly, he returned to catch for the Irishmen for a short time in '61-'62 when the Nebraska Independent League was reorganized. When asked to compare the NIL of the 40's to that of 1961, he termed the former as being "faster and better." "The difference is in the number of older, experienced hands playing" (in the 40's).

The Nebraska Independent League in 1946 was made up of six teams: Lexington, Holdrege, McCook, North Platte, Hastings, and Kearney. The schedule consisted of a split season; ten games played each half. Teams usually played every Sunday. The 1946 season began on May 5 and ended on August 25; the first half ending on July 4, and the second half beginning on July 7. Kearney was undefeated the first half of the season, but was only 4-4 the second half (North Platte cancelled its last two games with Kearney). Lexington won the second half of the season with a 7-3 record. This set the stage for a three-game championship playoff and what is still called the most memorable game in Irishmen baseball.

Kearney, behind Roh's four-hit pitching, beat Lexington in the first game 17-1. In the second game, Lexington's legendary lefthander, Lefty Haines, shutout Kearney on two hits. Then came the memorable game. The first game had been played at Kearney's Memorial Field in front of 2,500 fans. The second game at Lexington was witnessed by 1,800 spectators. The 3,000 fans drawn to Memorial for the third game were destined to watch what Howard Baxter would later call "one of the greatest ball games ever played here" It was a repeat of what had become a classic pitching match-up during the summer, the Irishmen's, Roman Roh versus Lexington's ace, Lefty Haines. Going into the championship game the two had split their previous match-ups; Roh had beaten Haines in their first meeting 1-0, pitching a one-hitter. Haines had won the second meeting 2-0, beating Roh and Kearney in Kearney. In the championship game, Haines held a 1-0 lead into the bottom of the ninth. A one-out error, an intentional walk, and another base on balls loaded the bases. A hesitation throw to the plate on Ben Johnson's infield grounder was too late, and the score was tied. Harvey Daake, lefthanded hitting first baseman for the Irishmen came to the plate and hit the second pitch from Haines over the rightfield fence. Baxter described the excitement: "Daake had to struggle through a mass of players and fans to get to home plate and was promptly hoisted on the shoulders of a back-slapping throng and carried from the field." Harvey Daake had become one of the memorable parts of the 1946 "dream season."

The '46 Irishmen were a unit, not just a collection of regular ballplayers with a great pitcher. The final league statistics support this fact. Kearney led the league in hitting with a team average of .271. Manager Floyd Stickney won the individual batting title hitting .492, which is an all-time high for the NIL. Gerald Peterson, Kearney second baseman, finished seventh hitting .325; catcher Bob Stickney finished eighth with a .321 average and shortstop Enver Cleland finished ninth with a .304 average. Ray Johnson tied for the home run crown with 2 and Daake led the league in triples with 6. The Irishmen led the league in fielding with .947 percentage and in double plays with 18. At the end of the season, manager Floyd Stickney had this to say about the team: "This is the best bunch of fellows I ever played with, pro ball and all. They have a wonderful spirit and not a rounder in the bunch."

SOURCES

Microfilm of *Kearney Daily Hub*, 1934-1946, Kearney Public Library; Hazel Stickney, Scrapbook and Memorabilia, Private Collection.

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- Basic Membership\$15.00
- Institutional Membership\$20.00
- Supporting Membership\$30.00 +

Life memberships are \$150.00 for an individual; \$200.00 husband and wife.

Directors

Term expiring June 1, 1995: Glen Wisch, Philip Holmgren, Larry Nansel, Floretta Sullwold.

Term expiring June 1, 1996: Susan C. Lynch, Margaret Hohnholt, Wilma Harder, Helen Kinnaman.

Term expiring June 1, 1997: Mardi Anderson, Janet Eickmeier, Dan Speirs, Susan Underhill.

Officers (1 year term)

- PresidentLarry Nansel
- Vice-PresidentPhilip Holmgren
- SecretaryMargaret Hohnholt
- TreasurerMardi Anderson

TRAILS & RAILS MUSEUM

Trails & Rails Museum is officially closed for the season. We closed with a bang, having over 125 visitors the last 2½ days. We are open only by appointment for groups at this time.

Our attendance was up again this year. A GREAT BIG THANK YOU to Wilma Larsen for organizing the volunteers and to the many volunteers who helped greet guests from 1 - 5 P.M. every afternoon all summer. You did a super job!

Although we are closed, activity continues. Howard Kolbo has been doing some painting. Myron Fougeron has helped him. The yard has been sprayed for weeds. Seeding is being planned around the new Wagon Barn. Displays are being changed in anticipation of the Christmas Tree Walk.

The Christmas Tree Walk—A WINTER WONDERLAND—will be held December 3-10 from 1 to 5 p.m. each day. Wilma and her helpers will be calling you to sit in the building and to bring food for the Bake Sale. Plan to do some of your Christmas buying at the bake sale and the gift shop.

If you have specific days you wish to help, you may call Wilma at 237-2697. For food donations, you may call Wilma or me at 234-3041 or 237-7327. It's your help that makes this a good project.

—Margaret Hohnholt, Volunteer Director

Trails & Rails Museum 706 West 11th Street (308) 234-3041

Buffalo County Historical Society

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