

{ BY BERRY CRAIG }

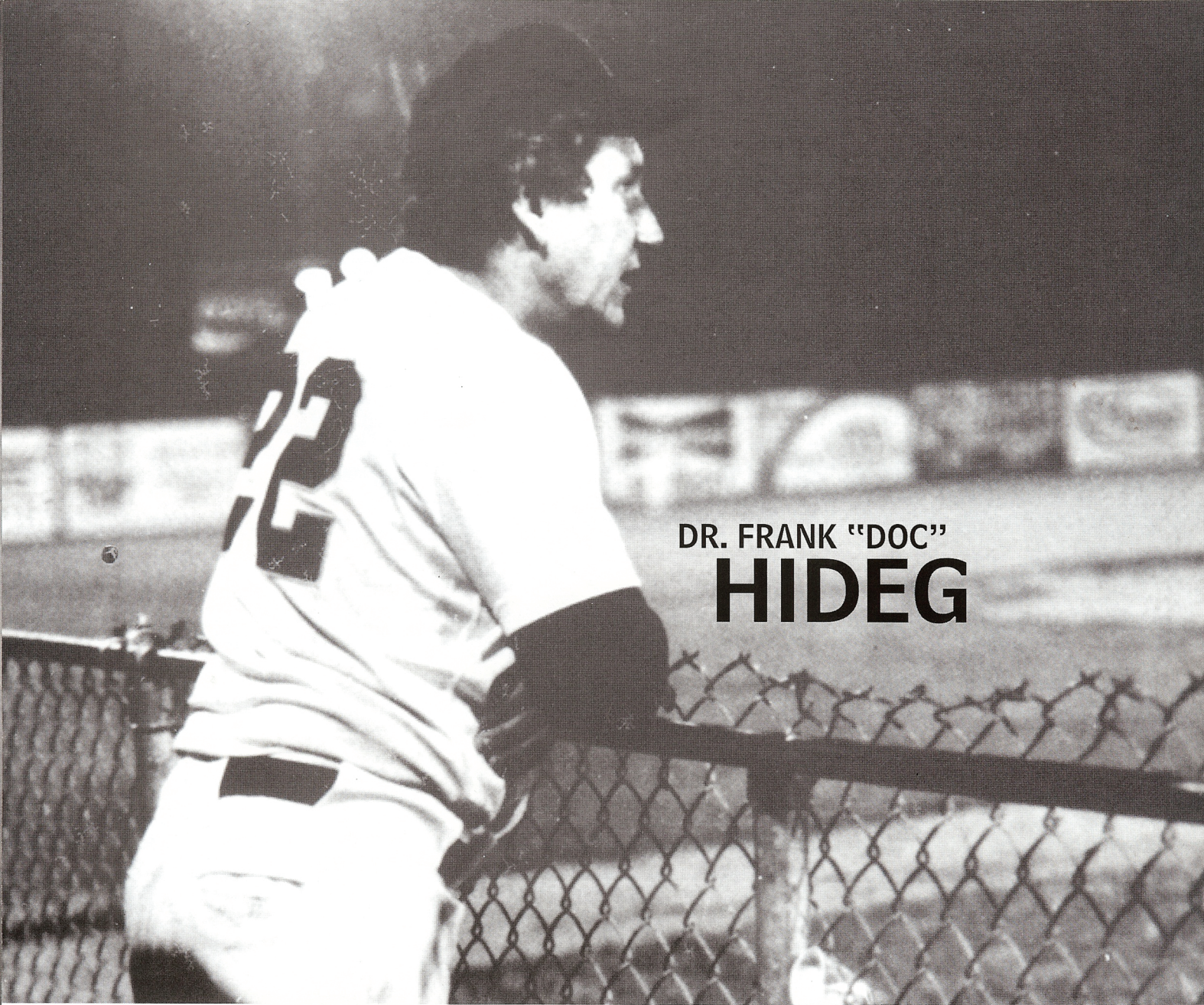
THE HOUSE THAT BROOKS BUILT

A weighty parade of players and patrons have gone to BAT for this beautiful and historic baseball field

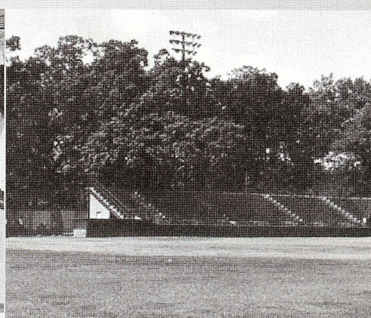
J. POLK BROOKS' FIELD OF DREAMS WILL TURN 60 NEXT YEAR. "He wanted to bring professional baseball back to Paducah," Bob Swisher, retired WPSD-TV sports director, said of the builder and namesake of Brooks Stadium. "He loved that stadium." • Brooks' daughter, Carol Brooks, agrees. "He thought the stadium would really mean something to the city," she said. "Daddy really cared for his community." • Brooks Stadium is one of the oldest baseball parks still in use in Kentucky. It opened on May 8, 1949, when the Paducah Chiefs hosted the Mattoon Indians from Illinois. • The Chiefs hit the field after "a thumping sendoff in a Jaycee-sponsored parade about 15 blocks long," the Paducah *Sun-Democrat* reported. The visitors won, 13-12,

J. POLK BROOKS
AND EWING HAYDEN





DR. FRANK "DOC"
HIDEG



SERIES FROM LEFT • J. Polk Brooks and two-year-old Michael N. Jones from a 1950 Chicago Daily Tribune article about Brooks Stadium. • An early locker room. • "Doc" Hideg Field • Members of an American Legion team boasting three future major leaguers. Back from left: Jim Johnston, Dave Gourieux, Todd Smith and Kerry Boudreaux. Middle row: Doc Hideg, Junior Shumpert, Piggy Randle, Tony Cippola, Jimmy Flash Mitchell, Joe Milford. Front row: Tracey Thommason, Barry Wurth, David Henley, Steve Finley, Joe Hall. Finley, Shumpert and Hall went on to play in the majors • An early Paducah Chiefs program from the collection of Carol Brooks.

“The experiences that I have had, personally and professionally, with the events that I have had the pleasure to conduct in Paducah have been second to none.” — FORMER OVC OFFICIAL RON ENGLISH



“and in doing so threw every trick in the books at the Chiefs in gaining the lead,” the paper added.

Doubtless, Brooks was sorry the home team lost. But he must have been happy at the turnout—“more than 3,500 patrons—the largest crowd in the history of the [Mississippi-Ohio] Valley League and its predecessor, the Illinois State League,” the *Sun-Democrat* added.

Minor league ball exited Paducah in 1955. It will make a one-day comeback on May 17, 2008.

The Marion-based Southern Illinois Miners will come to town for an exhibition game against the Evansville Otters. Both teams play in the Frontier League.

“It will be the first professional baseball game in Brooks Stadium since the Chiefs left,” said Dr. Frank Hideg, a local chiropractor who led the drive to save the old concrete and steel ballpark from the wrecking ball about 20 years ago.

After the Chiefs were gone, the city bought Brooks Stadium, which slowly fell into disrepair. After Brooks died in 1982 at age 75, his beloved ballpark seemed doomed. “Basically, it was condemned,” Hideg said. “The city was going to tear it down.”

“Doc” Hideg was determined to preserve “the House that Brooks Built.” He enlisted allies. They appealed to Mayor Gerry Montgomery.

“She agreed to help us,” Hideg said. “Mayor Albert Jones, John Hornsby, Mayor Bill Paxton and the city have supported us since. So have [McCracken County Judge-Executives] Danny Orazine and Van Newberry and the county government.”

commissioner. “Our support group includes Mark Thompson, the city parks director; and Mary Hammond, head of the Paducah-McCracken County Tourist Commission,” Hideg said.

He confessed that keeping a vintage ballpark in shape is a never-ending chore. But his toil has not gone unnoticed. Mayor Paxton and the city commission unanimously resolved to name the Brooks Stadium playing surface “Doc Hideg Field.”

“He is a tireless worker for that stadium,” said City Commissioner Gerald Watkins. “He has dedicated his life to making it the best baseball stadium in the area.”

Ohio Valley Conference officials evidently agree. The OVC baseball tournament is held annually in May at the ballpark on Brooks Stadium Drive. “We were pleased with the experience [in Paducah] and it seems to get better and better each year,” said Dr. Jon A. Steinbrecher, OVC commissioner. “We have very much appreciated how the leadership of the city and county has embraced us.”

Former OVC official Ron English agrees. “Paducah opens its arms, makes you feel welcome, and takes you in as one of its own,” said English, who is now director of the NCCA Division I men’s basketball tournament. “The experiences that I have had, personally and professionally, with the events that I have had the pleasure to conduct in Paducah have been second to none.”

Hideg is happy to hear that. “May will be a big month, especially this year,” he said. “Not only do we have the OVC tournament and the minor league game, the University of Kentucky will play Murray State.”



The city still owns Brooks Stadium, but the Brooks Stadium Commission maintains the ballpark. Commission members are Hideg; Carol Brooks; Howard Finley, father of major leaguer Steve Finley; Don Dixon; Leo Green; Greg McKeel; and City Commissioner Buzz Smith. The late Coy Stacey was also a

Brooks Stadium is home to the Tilghman High School Tornado and American Legion Chief Paduke Post 31 baseball teams. The ballpark also has hosted Legion tournament play.

“Your baseball field is a masterpiece in historic preservation and the field conditions couldn’t have been better,” said

Sam Torstenson, assistant director of the Legion's National Region 4 baseball tourney. "We certainly enjoyed all the Southern hospitality and plan to make a return visit to enjoy your special attractions in beautiful Paducah."

The city's ballpark is known as a top-quality facility well beyond western Kentucky. "[Radio broadcaster] Mike Shannon last year on the [St. Louis] Cardinal network called Brooks Stadium one of the finest amateur baseball parks in the United States," said Swisher, the Chiefs' radio voice in 1953-1955.

Swisher is a longtime Brooks Stadium booster. "To be honest, there has never been anybody I have asked for help who has said 'no,'" Hideg said.

He is hesitant to name names, fearing he might leave somebody out. But pressed, Hideg agreed to brag on his helpers.

He said Steve Finley, McKeel and Stacey contributed "significant help and money."

Finley, who grew up in Paducah, played in the World Series twice. A Tilghman standout, he was a Brooks Stadium star.

McKeel owns McKeel Equipment Co. "I couldn't get along without Greg," Hideg said. "Without his help there is no way we would be where we are today."

Stacey was a longtime city restaurant owner and baseball fan.

Hideg said he has several other business backers: AAA Fence, Cole Lumber, Federal Materials, Rasche Cycle, Jim Smith Construction and Marion, Illinois, Pepsi-Cola, James Sanders Nursery, Guy Gray Supply, Ferguson's Bath and Kitchens and Kingston Portables. "I appreciate everything all of the business owners do for the stadium," he said.

Hideg also named the Paducah Power System and Paducah Water Works as stadium supporters. "They've been great for us—and there have been so many others: Tilghman, the American Legion, Hardy Gentry, the Kentucky American Legion baseball chairman; Leo Green, who worked at WPSD-TV and is a coordinator for the OVC tournament; Ken Dickerson, our public address announcer; Steve Melloy, our marketing coordinator; Roy Dunning, our field coordinator; David Waggoner, electrician; the American Legion Auxiliary and Paducah Ambassadors."

He said Rex Smith, who owns Smith Construction, provided "generous help with the parking lot." Louis Haas, who is retired, has come through with "guidance and financial assistance" and Eddie Hannon "installed and provided the sprinkler system for the field," according to Hideg.

He said Paducah unions furnished volunteer laborers. He cited Carpenters Local 357, International Brotherhood of

Electrical Workers Local 816, Ironworkers Local 782 and Plumbers and Steamfitters Local 184.

"Gary Seay and Larry Sanderson took an unbelievable personal interest in the wiring and plumbing of the stadium," Hideg said. Seay recently retired as Local 816 business manager. Sanderson, Local 184 business manager for many years, is a Plumbers union international representative.

"Larry and I played together at Brooks Stadium on the Paducah team in the old Twin-States League," Hideg said. "He was a great first baseman."

In addition, Hideg said state and county inmates locked up for non-violent crimes in the McCracken County Jail are let out to water, mow grass and do other work at the stadium. So are inmates in a local halfway house.



LEFT: "These are the guys who keep the stadium at its peak and we couldn't do it without them," says Dr. Hideg. From left are Ken Dickerson, Steve Melloy and Roy Dunning. RIGHT: J. Polk Brooks, center, accepts an award with Bill Vick, right.

THE FIELD OF DREAMS

"Saving Brooks Stadium and keeping it going is a tremendous cooperative effort on the part of government, business and labor," Watkins said. "I'm sure Polk Brooks would be proud to see what's happened to his old stadium."

Seven years before Brooks Stadium opened, Paducah lost its pro baseball team, the Kitty League Paducah Indians. Fans feared pro ball was gone for good.

The Kitty League was reorganized for the 1946 season. By then, old Hook's Park, where the Indians played, was too dilapidated for another pro ball club, according to the Kitty League Internet website, www.kittyleague.com.

Brooks and others dreamed of a modern concrete and steel stadium. In 1947, they started the Paducah Baseball Association and began selling stock to fund the new ballpark, which was expected to cost \$75,000, the website said.

The association elected Brooks its president. He was well known as the owner of Brooks Bus Line.

Meanwhile, stadium construction began in May, 1948, and

continued through the summer. Brooks donned work clothes and pitched in.

He helped haul dirt, pour concrete and put up the walls, said his daughter, who retired from the family bus business. "If it needed doing, Daddy did it," Brooks added.

In January, 1949, J. Polk Brooks and the other baseball men landed a team, voting unanimously to accept a franchise in the Illinois State League. With the addition of the Paducah club, the league became the Mississippi-Ohio Valley League. Brooks was named vice president.

Like the old Kitty League, the Illinois State and Mississippi-Ohio Valley Leagues fielded Class D teams.

In advance of the first game, the *Sun-Democrat* sponsored a name-the-ballpark contest. "Readers voted to name it in honor of the person most responsible for its conception and construction," the website said, dubbing the stadium, "The House that Brooks Built," a takeoff on "The House that Ruth Built," the famous nickname for Yankee Stadium.

Probably no Paducahan was more pleased on opening day than J. Polk Brooks. He showed up at the stadium long before Circuit Judge Holland G. Bryan was scheduled to toss out the ceremonial first ball at 2:30 p.m. "The catching duties will be handled by City Manager Victor Hobday," the *Sun-Democrat* said.

The Chiefs were the main attractions in the pre-game procession. Each player was "riding high on the back seat of his own private convertible, the procession of cars, trucks and walking units moved through the downtown area under sunny skies," the *Sun-Democrat* said.

The parade must have been one of the lengthiest in city history. "Long after the head . . . passed Tenth and

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Broadway, tail-end units were still turning into the main drag at Second Street,” according to the paper. While the Chiefs enjoyed top billing, “the VFW Drill Team, Girl Scouts, the Optimist Club Knothole Gang, and a single file of a dozen Jaycee-led youngsters dressed as Indians added to the doin’s,” the *Sun-Democrat* said.

Mayor Gene Peak joined the parade though he had been ill for months. But he “was able to ride in the lead car and appeared to enjoy the fun,” the paper reported. “Other commissioners also rode in the parade.”

Jaycee Chairman Bill Cissell, who organized the procession, thanked local businesses for their cooperation. “They showed the Chiefs they’re really behind them,” the paper quoted the parade boss.

Across town, Brooks ordered the stadium gates parted at noon. He believed “many Paducah fans might want to come early and watch the clubs take hitting and infield practice,” the *Sun-Democrat* explained.

General admission was 65 cents. Box seats were a half-dollar more, according to the paper. “I don’t want to sound off in any way, but I want everyone that wants to see today’s game to see it—regardless,” Brooks told the newspaper, promising to buy anybody a ticket who couldn’t afford one.

To help swell the crowd, special city busses were to be rerouted to the park, “which is not on a regular run,” the newspaper advised. Fans could catch a ballpark-bound bus at the foot of Broadway between 1 and 2 p.m.

Pregame festivities were to start at 2:15. “The Tilghman band will be on hand to play ‘The Star Spangled Banner’ when the bright new Flag is raised from the center-field Flag-pole,” the *Sun-Democrat* said. “The Tilghman band will also furnish between-innings music.”

The Chiefs stayed in the MOV League for the 1949 and 1950 seasons. The team returned to the Kitty League in 1951, where it stayed until the league disbanded in 1955. In 1957, the Baseball Association sold the stadium to the city for \$25,000.

The Chiefs were affiliated with the Cardinals. The National League club “supplied the players and manager and paid a large part of their monthly salaries,” the website said.

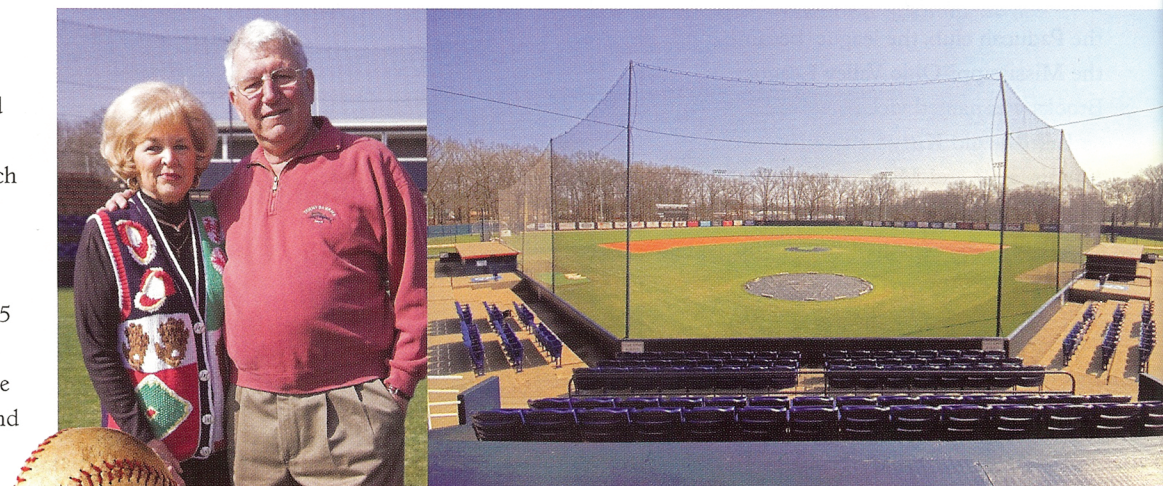
Swisher, who worked for WKYB radio, manned the Brooks

Stadium press box for home games and rode the team bus to enemy ballparks, including Miller Field in Owensboro. He remembered the Owensboro Oilers’ standout shortstop in 1953.

“We played four games in Owensboro, and he had a heck of a series,” Swisher said. “I was really extolling his virtues. So when Owensboro came here, we had a full house to see him.

“The first time he came up, he hit into a double play,” Swisher said. When Owensboro took the field, the kid committed a pair of errors. “He played the worst game you’ve ever seen in your life,” Swisher added with a chuckle.

The then 18-year-old Milwaukee native went on to play better baseball. He was the American League rookie of the



LEFT: Carol Brooks and Dr. Frank Hideg. RIGHT: Curtis Pitt, Todd Griffith and “Doc” Hideg.

year in 1957 and was on three AL All-Star teams.

He played nine seasons in the Big Leagues. His team claimed seven AL pennants, appeared in the World Series six times and won three times. After he retired, he was an NBC TV baseball announcer.

The ex-Oiler was Tony Kubek. He graduated from the House that Brooks Built to the House that Ruth Built, starring for the New York Yankees from 1957-1965.

Hideg said another future big league star might be on the

{ “Frank has had a lot of help, but he’s the main one who has kept the stadium going.” —CAROL BROOKS }

field when the Miners meet the Otters at Brooks Stadium. Carol Brooks promised if she’s in town, she’ll be at the game.

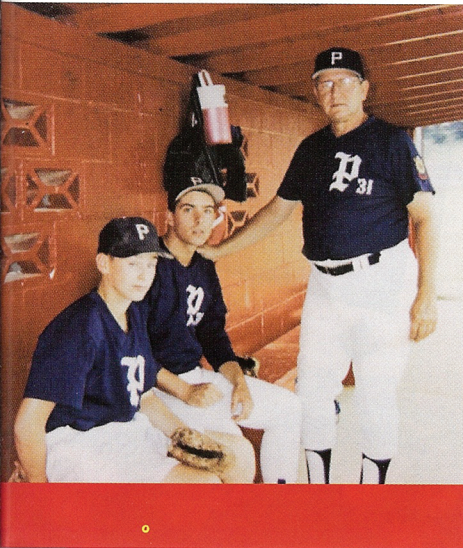
“When Frank says come, I’m there,” Brooks said. “Frank and my daddy were the best of friends. Frank has had a lot of help, but he’s the main one who has kept the stadium going.”

Hideg called Polk Brooks “a great friend and a great baseball

man. I feel privileged to have known him." Hideg and his family moved to Paducah from St. Louis in 1968. He remembered the first time he saw Brooks. It was at the stadium.

"He was watching our American Legion team work on the field after practice," said Hideg, who coached the Post 31 squad for 23 years. "Mr. Brooks asked how he could help."

Hideg said the park could use a chain-link fence in front of the



dugouts and between the foul lines and the stadium's inside walls. "By the end of the next day, we had a fence," he said.

Hideg still didn't know the name of his benefactor. He asked his assistant coach, Shorty Ford. "He said that was Polk Brooks. And I said, 'The guy who built this stadium?' But Mr. Brooks was there every day after, working on the field and sharing stories with us. We laughed every day out there. We had a good time."

Just as the stadium builder always did, Carol Brooks will buy a ticket if she takes in the Miners-Otters game. "We never went inside Brooks Stadium and didn't pay," Brooks said. "Daddy insisted on that." ©


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