

Legion team helps refurbish former Kitty League park

Brooks feels technology killed Chiefs

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The Paducah Baseball Association was organized in 1947.

Undoubtedly, it was an auspicious time for about any undertaking — the allies had won the war and although last rites were still being conducted for the remains of young Americans, who lost their lives overseas, the worst was over — it was a time of rebirth as historians are wont to say.

Perhaps it was this spirit of optimism that brought about the baseball association and the Paducah Chiefs. While the statements above are conjecture, the man who was probably most responsible for the construction of Brooks Stadium feels that improved technology, fostered by the war, brought the demise of the association and its team.

"We organized the Paducah Baseball Association in 1947," Brooks said recently, "and I was appointed president."

When Brooks was appointed president, it was decided to name the park after him.

The association board of directors included Sam Livingston, Henry Weil, R. E. Peters, Dr. Harry Wolfe, Sam Slean and Bill Carson.

"Most of these fellows were baseball people," Brooks said. "We decided we wanted baseball back, so we got together and organized it and got the money up to build the stadium."

The association sold stock at \$10 a share to raise the \$75,000 to \$85,000 need to buy the 22 acres for the park, and the construction materials.

Even in those days, labor and materials was not so inexpensive that the money raised was enough to complete the park. A headline in the Aug. 19, 1948, issue of the Sun-Democrat proclaimed, "Brooks Leaves Business To Work On Baseball Park Here."

The accompanying story also relates how

Brooks turned a dilapidated Buick into a thriving bus line — how he drove the fier on a passenger run to Detroit in 1929.

"Back in those days you could get things done," Brooks smiled. "People would help you. They helped you because they wanted baseball. The plumber on the stadium was Bob Morrow and we had dirt people, who would do just odds and ends to help out. Ike Gregory was one.

"We ran into a lot of problems, but we managed," Brooks continued. "We done a little begging, stealing, borrowing. Thirty years ago you did a lot of things you can't do today.

"Back then I worked on the park about 16 to 18 hours a day. I was usually out there by 4:30 or 5 in the morning."

The concrete fence around the outfield was Brooks' idea. "I'd never seen one like it before. It has solid concrete panels and H-columns that were hoisted in between the columns. It was cheaper at that time to do that than lay a concrete block fence and I suppose it has lasted longer."

"Happy" Chandler, then baseball commissioner, couldn't attend the opening day of Brooks Stadium, but came later in the summer to make the dedication official.

Any organization that plans to have a baseball team must get players from somewhere, so in 1948 arrangements were made with the Milwaukee Braves to furnish Paducah with players.

"The first year (1949) we were in the Mississippi-Ohio Valley League," Brooks said. "We couldn't get in the Kitty League because it was full up. Hillman Lyons of Mayfield was manager the first year."

Lyons advanced through baseball ranks and eventually became an assistant general manager for the Milwaukee Braves.

Some of the teams in the league at that time were Springfield, Ill.; Paris, Tenn.; Vincennes, Ind.; Centralia and West Frankfort.

The Paducah Chiefs changed to the Kitty League in 1951, becoming a farm club for the Cardinals and remained in that capacity until their last year — 1955.

"We had a pretty good record," Brooks said. "The last year we won the pennant."

"We pretty much supported ourselves. We had a working agreement with the Cardinals. They helped us a little, but the main things they gave us were players. We had fan turnouts between 1,000 and 1,500 for the games."

The spring and summer days of the late 1940s and 50s were the heydays of the Paducah Chiefs — fans could spend leisurely afternoons at Brooks Stadium, drinking 25-cent beer and eating "red hot dogs" that cost 15 cents — few people in Western Kentucky had heard of Dave Garraway or Howdy Dooey.

"The main reason we had to quit was because Mayfield, Fulton, Union City and other teams in the league couldn't support themselves," Brooks said. "TV came along and people just didn't get out. They could get entertainment at home and it just affected us to where we couldn't keep going."

"We could have joined the Three-I league, but the travel and expense would have eat us up. We would have had to go up into Indiana, Illinois and Iowa. We couldn't have stood the travel."

Brooks expressed the feelings of the association at the conception of the team, as well as when the team was dissolved.

"I don't know that we thought about the future," Brooks said. "We just wanted baseball. We were short of any kind of recreation at that time. Everybody hated it when we had to give it up. We hated to get out of baseball. We didn't know what to do with the stadium."

"When we were selling stocks, we told people to charge it as a loss if we didn't make it, and of course, we didn't."

Brooks said they advertised the dissolution of the association and paid the stockholders back about 12½ cents on the dollar.

After the Chiefs left town, use of the park fell considerably and thus funds to keep it in shape were difficult to come by. The box seats were removed and bleachers at each end of the main stadium were torn down.

Some time back representatives off the Paducah American Legion Post 31 baseball team contacted Brooks about revitalizing the once beautiful park. The legion team currently uses the park for home games and practice.

"They got after me last year to help them," Brooks said, "and I told them, 'I'll help you boys, but I don't want to start before 6 in the morning.' This year the ground was in pretty bad shape. I went over to look at it and thought I might supervise some."

"We've got the outfield in real good shape now, and we have part of the infield sodded. We tore the infield up like you are going to plant corn, but I think we got it in pretty good shape. We going to sod the playing infield after the season is over."

Brooks and Dr. Frank Hideg, manager of the American Legion team, gave credit of support for the park improvements to Jack Whaley of the Paducah Parks and Recreation Commission; Gene Ruoff; Paducah Tilghman High School, including Superintendent Whitehead, and the Federal Youth Program under the supervision of Harper Stackhouse.

"Frank's boys (the American Legion team) have been a real help," Brooks said. "They carried in all that sod."

Brooks was honored at ceremonies during the Polk Brooks tournament Saturday. Previously, Dr. Hideg said, "We're honoring him for everything he has done for baseball, especially for the special efforts he has made these last two years helping breath new life into Brooks Stadium."

"For years, we have heard from others how beautiful a park it was, and we're going to make every effort, with the help of Mr. Brooks, to have as good a field as anyone."