

For Love of the Game

With shared gloves on scratched-out fields,
small-town baseball players thrived.

By Raymond E. Ryle, Titusville, Florida

WHERE I GREW UP, in southeast Indiana, in the late 1940s and early '50s, there were only two sports that mattered—baseball and basketball. For me, baseball was king.

My father, Wallace “Hoppy” Ryle, was a player/manager who played first base for the semipro baseball team in Rising Sun.

“Semipro” implies that the players were paid for their performance, but that was not necessarily true. During home games, a hat or bucket was passed to take up a collection. That and concession-stand sales barely covered the cost of equipment and uniforms. Players usually bought their own baseball gloves, and their wives made uniform repairs. They played for the love of the game.

These athletes were farmers, merchants or factory workers; my father worked at the Seagram’s distillery in Lawrenceburg. They were heroes only to their families—except on Sundays, when they became the pride of the town.

I can vividly recall the preacher talking about keeping the Sabbath holy and then umpiring the baseball game that afternoon. When the reverend umpired, the players seldom yelled some of the words that I was not allowed to say.

Each set of bleachers seated maybe 50 people, while other fans sat on lawn chairs or car fenders just outside the foul lines. It seemed to me that the whole world was there to see my dad and his team play.

When Rising Sun's team would travel to Burlington, Kentucky, the line to the ferryboat going across the Ohio River at Aurora would be backed up with cars full of fans.

Few of the baseball diamonds had outfield fences, so a home run was anything over the outfielders' heads. In Rising Sun, a sure homer was any ball that flew or bounced into the cemetery tombstones that stood beyond the narrow blacktop road bordering right and center fields.

Our "dugouts" were rough, homemade benches, and our bases were little more than gunnysacks filled with sawdust. The pitching rubber and home plate were the only professionally made parts on the field.

Before the game, players took a piece of chicken-wire fencing, weighted with cement blocks, in their hands and dragged it around the infield to smooth it out. For the baselines, lime was carefully shaken from a coffee can along a string knotted at exactly 90 feet.

If there were not enough masks or chest protectors, the umpire would call balls and strikes from behind the pitcher. Bats and gloves were shared between the teams if there were not enough to go around.

In 1950, when my father was purchasing new uniforms, in Cincinnati, he surprised me by getting me one. I was to be the team batboy. I supervised closely as my mother applied the iron-on letters to my uniform. How proud I was to drag and carry the big bats back to the bench.

High-flying spikes and crashes at home plate were not uncommon—the games were played seriously—but afterward, the opposing teams would gather for cold drinks and to rehash the game's highlights.

It was baseball the way it was supposed to be played, the emphasis

being put on “played.” It was pure Americana —play and work hard, obey the rules, support your side, cheer a great play, win with pride and accept defeat while vowing to “get ’em the next time.”