

"American Legion Baseball Celebrated 50th Birthday in 1975"

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By Jay A. Graybeal

The Great American Pastime has been a part of local recreation and entertainment since the late nineteenth century. Community baseball clubs composed of adult players were organized in many Carroll towns. Youth teams were created in the early twentieth century and have grown to include boys and girls of all ages. Many civic organizations and local governments have provided sponsorship of their respective leagues.

The American Legion has sponsored a national baseball league since 1925. The July 18, 1975 issue of the Mt. Airy Community Reporter newspaper carried a front page story about the 50th anniversary of Legion Baseball:

"Legion Baseball is Marking Its 50th Birthday — Mt. Airy Team Celebrating Its Third Year of Involvement in Program Started Half Century Ago

This season marks the Golden Anniversary of American Legion baseball in the United States. It was on July 17, 1925, in the community of Milbank, South Dakota, that the initiation of this fine Americanism program got underway through the efforts of the South Dakota Department of the American Legion. The program's existence can best be explained by a portion of the words inscribed on a marble monument in that town which reads 'A program of service to the youth of America.'

American Legion Baseball became a national program by action of the National Convention at Omaha, Nebraska in 1925 and the first national tournament was held in 1926. In 1928, the program came into full bloom under the sterling leadership of Dan Sowers, then National Director of the Americanism Commission. Legion baseball has become one of the major activities of the Americanism program because it offers many possibilities for teaching lessons in citizenship as well as providing an outlet for the restless energy of youth. The bringing together of over 75,000 boys each year into one great nation-wide program in an activity designed to teach practical and concrete lessons in sportsmanship and citizenship through the playing of America's own game of baseball is quite an undertaking. The basic principle which underlies this program is the undisputable self-evident truth that organized and directed play molds character. Such qualities as loyalty, respect for rules and decisions, fair play, sportsmanship, courage and physical fitness are essential to the proper development of American youth.

Many American Legion Baseball players are now active in the major leagues -- Steve Garvey, Brooks Robinson, Catfish Hunter, Rollie Fingers, Jim Palmer, Tom Seaver, Reggie Jackson, Pete Rose, Johnny Bench, and many others. Hundreds of others are on the rosters of minor league clubs.

The Mt. Airy Legion team is celebrating its 3rd birthday. It was in the fall of 1972 that the then Commander of Gold Star Post 191, Tony Lazarewicz, formed a baseball committee to look into the possibility of the Post Sponsoring a Legion baseball team for youngsters 16 – 18 years old. In the community, there were strong little league teams for boys 9 –12 years old and an active pony league for boys 13 – 15 years of age, but no baseball teams for the youth 16 – 18. Seeing the need, and as part of its Children and Youth Program with Andrew Mason as Chairman, a team was organized and commenced competition in the summer of 1973. In 1974 Commander Doug Henley gave full support to the team by his leadership interest. His efforts enabled the Post team to really get on its feet. He initiated activities

that fostered development. In 1974 Commander Tom Wagner provided the excellent leadership and effort that has resulted in the construction of new bleachers, a concession stand, installation of a backstop, and the renovation and painting of the baseball dugouts. Next year, with the support of the community and the post membership, it is hoped that fill dirt can be brought in to extend the outfield and that a new fence can be installed.

The Post 191 of the American Legion stands for a strong America and it hopes that through its many youth activities that it is playing a leading role in the wholesome development of future citizens. The manager and coach of the Mt. Airy team is Andrew Mason, who has spent the last twenty-five years working with youth in various community activities. This year he is being assisted by Legionnaire Ron Robinson and by parent Bob Franklin. Mrs. Joyce Eggleston of the Ladies' Auxiliary has done much of the painting at the baseball field. Ray Wilder is the team photographer. Gene Deardorff and Charles Norwood are in charge of the concessions at baseball games."

Although baseball remains highly popular, today's local youth have far greater athletic opportunities since Legion baseball started in 1925. There are also opportunities for girls and young women that were unheard of in the 1920s. Much of the credit is due to the volunteer efforts of local civic organizations that sponsor leagues.

Photo caption: The Westminster High School Base Ball Club, photographed in 1914, was a forerunner of local baseball teams. Top row left to right: T. Cash, Manager; C. H. Kolb, Principal; G. F. Morelock, County Superintendent. Middle Row left to right: P. Little, substitute; H. Grumbine, short stop; C. Masonhimer, second base; L. Billingslea, pitcher and left field; H. Whitmore, left field; W. Masonhimer; center field. Lower Row left to right: E. Bell, right field; P. Shaffer, third base; S. Beacham, first base; C. Diffendal, pitcher and left field and Capt. Arnold, catcher. The team "mascot" W. Arnold posed in front of the players. Historical Society of Carroll County collection, gift of Howard G. Myers, 1998.