



Buffalo Tales



Volume 17, No. 4

Buffalo County Historical Society

July-August, 1994

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

by Gary Stickney

In his book by the same name, Roger Kahn uses the phrase "boys of summer" to describe the 1955 Brooklyn Dodgers, who he considers to be one of the best, if not the best, Dodger team in history. In the middle of this century, from 1937 to 1962, the city of Kearney had its own "boys of summer"; they were called the Irishmen, and it is generally acknowledged that the 1946 Kearney Irishmen were one of the best, if not the best of the Irishmen teams.

The Irishmen era can be divided into three different phases: pre-war and war years, 1937-1945; post war years, 1946-1954; and reorganization years 1960-1962.

The originator and driving force of the Irishmen era was R. F. "Mike" Hollinger.



Flying Dutchmen 1933, became Kearney Irishmen in 1935. Front row, Bat boys: Hall, Calfie, Hollinger. Front row team: Pat Panek, Charlie Wells, Ace Needham, Barney Phelps, Wilson, Dode Graham, Paul Calfee, Sponsor. Back row: Dungan, Red Hall, Ben Johnson, Frank Fink, Floyd Dunker, Mike Hollinger, manager.

WITH THE SOCIETY

A NOTE FROM THE PRESIDENT:

Here it is time for my first President's Note. Writing isn't one of my favorite ways of expressing myself. I really prefer speaking and I'm not too good at that!

If you haven't visited the museum in the last month, we would like to have you stop in. Wisch Construction is progressing very well on the display barn and storage shed. After completion we will put the wagons in the barn and then be able to get the articles from the storage we have rented at the University and put all of them in the new building.

This note also gives me the opportunity, on behalf of the Historical Society, to thank all of our volunteers and especially our Museum Director for all their hours of work. Without them we would not be able to have the high quality museum that we have here in Buffalo County. Thank you, Larry K. Nansel

.

Just published — Reprint of Volume I, *Tales of Buffalo County*. The 152-page paperback, with photos and index, includes articles of Buffalo County history first printed in the 1978-1980 *Buffalo Tales*. Some of the stories relate to the Oregon Trail and the John D. Randall diary, the Mormon Trail and Oliver family, the Kearney Canal, Watson (1733) Ranch, early post offices and railroads, and history of some of the towns and ghost towns of the county. Cost of Volume I is \$10.00, plus \$1.50 for mailing and 60¢ sales tax to Nebraskans.

Also on hand are Volumes II, III and IV, at \$6.50, \$7.50 and \$8.95, respectively, plus the same mailing charges and tax. On September 5 all volumes will increase to \$10.00 each.

Tales of Buffalo County are available at the Trails & Rails Museum or can be ordered from the Society, Box 523. Kearney, NE 68848.

.

NEW BASIC MEMBER

Winona Whitney Kearney

.

TRAILS & RAILS MUSEUM

(Continued from Page 6)

Lots to Love shop did a commercial at the Museum. It was filmed by NTV and will be aired this fall. Watch for it. It will also be used in several surrounding states.

The donor Board has been updated. Alice Howell did the updating and Don Smith put them up.

Young men and women from the Latter Day Saints Church spent an evening cleaning at the Museum. There was a large group. They washed windows, weeded, cleaned and much more. They ended their evening with home-made ice cream.

Dean Curtis & Associates had lunch at the Museum one day at which they did some training, then went to the Schoolhouse to do some more training. There were many from around the state and out-of-state. They were even held up by some outlaws!

—Margaret Hohnholt, Volunteer Director

In the late 20's and all through the 30's, Mike was an outstanding baseball and softball player, and in 1936 he agreed to manage the nameless local baseball team which was eventually dubbed the "Irishmen" in tribute to its fiery "hustling and bustling" leader. Although conclusive proof hasn't been determined, the nickname probably was given by either Mickey McConnell or Howard Baxter, sportswriters for the Kearney Daily Hub. Mike's teams were extremely successful and almost annually the Irishmen participated in the state semipro tournament in Omaha each July.

Perhaps more important, Mike was famous for providing an opportunity for the development of young ballplayers. One of those players was Floyd Stickney, a youngster from the Pleasanton area. Floyd had signed a pro contract with the Cardinal organization in 1937 but was released because of weak hitting. In an interview in 1976 with a Kearney Hub reporter, Stickney credited Mike Hollinger for giving him an opportunity to get back into professional baseball. "I was down." It was the first time I'd failed in athletics. That was when I came to Kearney and met a man who was a major force in my life. He's probably done as much or more for baseball than anyone in this town." While playing for the Irishmen, Floyd was re-signed by the Cardinals and spent the next four years of his life playing professional baseball.

Ironically, when Mike Hollinger decided to step down as manager of the Irishmen in 1946, it was Floyd Stickney who was chosen as the new manager.

In his sports column entitled "The McCoy," Kearney sportswriter Howard Baxter commented on the reorganization of Kearney baseball. "The decision of the Veterans of Foreign Wars to get behind the local Independent loop entry gives the club some solid backing. The local baseball association starts the season in the best financial shape in years, with a hold-over bank account to give it a start and the support of the VFW to assure success." There was also praise for Mike Hollinger. "For the first time in more than a decade of summers, R. F. "Mike" Hollinger won't be holding the managerial reins. It won't seem quite right not to have the hustling, bustling Mike at the helm. Mike was



Kearney Irishmen in 1935: K. Worland, L. Hawkins, B. Johnson, H. Daake, Art Neeley, B. Lemaster, Chick Harold, C. Soucek, H. Goethe, Bill Gardner, G. Stucker, Mike Hollinger, manager, and Mickey McConnell. Bat boy: Randy Hollinger.

offered the job again, but he chose to step down for a younger man and for business reasons. Hollinger has given much of his time in recent years to managing the local nine and certainly deserves a respite. He may rest assured that his efforts in promoting baseball are appreciated by diamond enthusiasts in the Kearney vicinity." The column emphasizes that Mike will continue to help Floyd Stickney "to get the ball rolling" and that in hiring Stickney, "the baseball association made a fine choice. Floyd probably knows as much inside baseball as anyone in these parts. He is the type of fellow who can get along with his fellow players and is an all-out hustler from the word "go." You can bet the local nine will still have the zip and pepper that was characteristic of Hollinger-managed teams."

There was an interesting development that occurred with the team's name in the first part of '46. Part of the new movement was the changing of uniforms. Generally, the Irishmen had always worn uniforms which were either gray or white with green trim. In '46 they switched to white uniforms with navy trim. The socks were white on the top half and navy blue on the bottom half, hence the team was referred to as the "Blues" or the "Blue Sox." Howard Baxter commented on the name change: "Formerly known as the "Irishmen," members of the team feel that the monicker is no longer in order, now that the squad does not perform in green uniforms and probably has more "Swedes" on it than "Irishmen." However, the players and backers are willing to go by the name with which the fans may wish to tag them. The sponsoring Veterans of Foreign Wars wish to leave the selection up to the fans, too." A contest was initiated, and the first fan who sent in the name that eventually was chosen by the Kearney Baseball Association was to be given a free season ticket to the Kearney games. In a follow-up column Baxter reported there was a minimum of written response from fans, but he noted that verbal response favored retaining the old tag of "Irishmen." He then added this paragraph, "Real reason back to the decision to operate again as the Irishmen is that Jack Carberry, sports editor of the Denver Post and director of the Post tournament, suggested that, if possible, the team play under the banner of "Irishmen" because of the past reputation of the club, a reputation which was largely built while local diamond buddies were cavorting as the 'Irishmen'." The Irishmen would remain the Irishmen. The name never changed.

This post-war phase of the Kearney Irishmen could be termed the "golden age" of semiprofessional baseball in the area. Nearly every town had its "boys of summer," but the Nebraska Independent League (NIL) seemed especially blessed with a brand of baseball that was called by some "the best semipro baseball in the Midwest." There were several contributing factors.

As previously mentioned in this article, there was the leadership. Men with the love for baseball such as Mike Hollinger and Floyd Stickney are certainly unique. (In the twenty-five years of Irishmen baseball seventeen of those years were under the management of Hollinger and Stickney.)

For the most part these were pre-television years, years when people sought their entertainment at social functions such as ballparks. To most midwesterners, major league baseball was something you listened to on the radio or read about in the newspaper. "Real baseball" was to be experienced at the local ballpark. This type of baseball interest created a certain type of spectator. Unlike the baseball aficionado of today, filled with statistics and theories, the 40's fan came to the ballpark to see teams who hustled and manufactured runs by moving runners with sacrifice bunts, the

hit-and-run, and aggressive base running. Intense pitching duels were frequent in the NIL, and the fans learned to appreciate these low scoring contests much as the modern fan is enamored by the hitting of home runs in today's games.

The most important factor in making this the golden age of Kearney baseball was the players. They were farmers, businessmen, postmen, teachers, students, typical working class men six days a week; but on Sundays they became baseball players—good baseball players. Players who played as hard and intensely as anyone who played the game. What can explain their intensity and desire? It certainly wasn't motivated by money. Only the manager and a few select pitchers received any monetary compensation. At the beginning of the year it was agreed that any profit after the bills were paid would be split among the players; but that amount, if it ever existed, was meager at best. Perhaps it was the work ethic that was spawned out of the war years or the depression. For whatever reason, the fans' enthusiasm was rewarded with emotion and skill.

(Continued in next issue)

BASEBALL

Sunday, June 2

At NEW HARMON PARK FIELD
KEARNEY

GAME TIME 2:30 P. M.

KEARNEY

VS.

LEXINGTON

NEBRASKA INDEPENDENT LEAGUE

This is one of the highlights of the season. Kearney has won 4, lost none; Lexington has three victories and one defeat in the Independent League.

SEMI-PRO BASEBALL AT IT'S BEST

ADMISSION 50c
BOYS AND GIRLS UNDER 10 FREE

BUFFALO TALES is the official publication of the Buffalo County Historical Society, a non-profit organization, whose address is P. O. Box 523, Kearney, NE 68848-0523.

1994 Annual dues, payable January 1, are:
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)

President Larry Nansel
Vice-President Philip Holmgren
Secretary Margaret Hohnholt
Treasurer Mardi Anderson

TRAILS & RAILS MUSEUM

This has been a busy summer. Our attendance is up from last year although some days we do not have as many as others, our average is good. We have quite a number of tour groups and evenings seem to be good for families who are spending the night.

The Buffalo head which was displayed in the freight room with our Oregon Trail display last year was loaned to us by Sarah Fairbanks of Hastings. She has now picked it up and it is on display in the Chimney Rock exhibit area. We really do thank her for letting us use it.

When we are not busy with tours our guides are doing the many things that need to be done in any museum. It takes much cleaning to keep things neat when you have from 25 to 65 people through the building in a day. We have also been working on the weeds in the brick sidewalks and those in the grass. Displays are kept in order and cleaned as needed.

Thanks need to be given to those who displayed on Collections Day—Toby Tollefsen, Jack Rall, Bea Elliott, Becky Randall, Merwyn and Gladys Henderson, Glen and Marian Wisch, Dan Spiers, The Tom Bosshardt Family, Helen Marshall and many more. Thanks much!!!

(Continued Bottom of Page 2)

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

Buffalo County Historical Society

Box 523

Kearney, NE 68848-0523

Address Correction Requested

Non-Profit Organization
Bulk Rate
U.S. Postage
PAID
Postal Permit No. 7
Kearney, Nebraska