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Early Baseball and Historic Liberty Park Stadium in Sedalia, Missouri

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Mark E. Eberle

Introduction

The book *Kansas Baseball, 1858–1941* highlighted the early history of the local game in the state, along with the stories of nine small baseball parks that have grandstands constructed prior to the Second World War.¹ These historical treasures continue to be lost around the country, and much of the sport’s history is lost with them. Missouri also has a few such ballparks remaining within its borders, including those in Carthage, Hannibal, and St. Joseph (see the appendix). In addition, Sedalia has what is arguably one of the finest examples in the nation of a ballpark with an historic wooden grandstand that continues to serve its original purpose. What follows is a brief introduction to baseball in Sedalia from the end of the Civil War through the Great Depression, along with the history of baseball in Liberty Park that culminated in construction of the grandstand still in use more than 80 years later.

Town Teams and Minor Leagues

In the decades following the Civil War, Sedalia was represented on the baseball field by amateur or semiprofessional town teams. In the beginning, the number of games was limited by the available travel options, with trains being the typical mode of transportation for teams and their fans. Sometimes special trains were run just to accommodate the participants. It was also a challenge to schedule games because of objections to recreational activities on Sundays, including baseball. This presented a problem to both players and spectators, who usually worked until early evening on the other six days of the week. Lights at baseball fields that would allow games to be played after typical work hours did not become widespread until the 1930s. Thus, business owners and other civic leaders with more freedom to practice or play during normal work hours typically comprised the members of the earliest teams.²

The first team to represent Sedalia was the Empire Club, organized in 1867. It was a gentleman’s club in the truest sense, and baseball games—or more accurately, “base ball” games—were grand affairs. During June and July, the secretary of the Empire Club exchanged a series of letters with the chairman of the Capital Club of Jefferson City on behalf of their respective presidents. The result of these formal challenges and counterproposals was agreement by the clubs to play a three-game series under the rules of the National Association of Base Ball Players (NABBP). The first game was played in Sedalia, the second in Jefferson City, and the third in the neutral town of California, situated between the two cities. These were major social events held on workdays, prompting at least some of the local businesses to close when their towns hosted a game, just as they would on national holidays.³

The first game was played on June 22, a hot Saturday afternoon in Sedalia. The host Empire Club impressed their guests from Jefferson City with “the cordial reception, the music, the tables groaning with the good things of this life, and the general urbanity and

good feeling of the Empire Club and the citizens of Sedalia.” The eight-inning game lasted five hours, “from half past 2 o’clock to half past 7 o’clock P. M., and was witnessed by about 1,000 persons, among them many ladies.” Despite giving up 19 runs to the Capitals in the final inning, the Empire Club easily won the game, 81 to 53.⁴ By the rules of the day, pitchers threw the ball underhand, fielders wore no gloves, and strikers (batters) dominated the game. Box scores for these early games provided only two types of data for each player—how many outs he made and how many runs he scored.

On July 1, an equally hot Monday afternoon in Jefferson City, the Capital Club treated their guests from Sedalia to lunch before defeating them 74 to 59 in seven innings, although the score remained close until the final inning. Once again, the game was the central event, but other activities were integral parts of the festivities.

After the close of the game the Capital Club escorted their opponents to the Tennessee House, where a supper was served up to some hundred guests, including the party from Sedalia. After supper, dancing was inaugurated, and continued into the “wee sma’ hours,” and thus ended the game of base ball.⁵

With each team winning its home game, it was fitting that the third and deciding contest on the neutral grounds of the Occidental Club in California on Wednesday, July 17, lasted the full nine innings. Victory went to the Empire Club, 49 to 39, at least temporarily. Both teams added substitute players to their rosters to replace a few players from the earlier games who did not attend the final contest. Umpire Frank Lewis, vice president of the Express Club of St. Louis, later declared the game a “nullity” because he “ascertained that the best player on [the Empire] side was not a member of the Club; or, if a member, sufficient time had not elapsed to entitle him to play in a match game.”⁶ Sedalia and Jefferson City remained rivals in the coming decades.

Capital.	o	r	Empire.	o	r					
Brad, c	2	4	Comings, c	2	6					
McClusky, p	5	4	Sheer, p	2	6					
Tammany, 1st b	1	6	Shoot, 1st b	1	8					
St. John, 2d b	3	2	Weiler, 2d b	3	7					
Montgomery, 3d b	5	3	White, 3d b	4	6					
Shaeffer, l f	2	6	Jackson, l f	4	3					
Krokel, c f	2	6	Eoyer, c f	2	4					
Meinrichs, r f	2	6	Chenyfelt, r f	5	4					
Kavanaugh, s s	5	2	Renish, s s	4	5					
	27	39		27	49					
Umpire, Frank Lewis.										
Scorers.—Capital, T. Matthews, Jr. Empire, E. T. Cronk.										
Innings.....	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	Total.
Capital.....	6	0	7	5	6	5	2	3	5	39
Empire.....	6	6	4	10	6	4	5	6	2	49

Box score from the final baseball game of the three-game series between the Empire Club of Sedalia and the Capital Club of Jefferson City, Missouri in 1867. Similar box scores listing players, positions, outs made (O), and runs scored (R) were published for the first two games of the series. *Missouri State Times*, Jefferson City, 19 July 1867 (<http://digital.shsmo.org/cdm/>).

Early home games in Sedalia were played at various sites, typically against teams from towns in western and central Missouri, along with occasional games against teams from St. Louis and eastern Kansas.⁷ Starting in 1881, baseball was regularly played at Sicher’s Park, which had been established the previous year.⁸ The field was of sufficient quality

that the Minneapolis (Minnesota) Millers of the Northwestern League scheduled their spring training in Sedalia in early April 1884.⁹

Beginning in the late 1880s, employees of the Missouri Pacific and the MK&T (Katy) railroads also organized teams.¹⁰ In 1890, the Katy team lost an exhibition game to the Chicago Colts of the young National League.¹¹ Additionally, the town was represented on the baseball diamond by various African American teams, such as the Sedalia Red Stockings (Reds) of the 1880s and the Sedalia Blues two decades later (names sometimes also used by local white teams). During the Great Depression, the African American team was known as the Sedalia All-Stars.¹²

As noted by a Jefferson City newspaper in 1867, the baseball teams—both white and black—were composed entirely of men.

There is something particularly fascinating about a game of ball. It has been played by every nation, kindred, tongue and people from the earliest times, and all mankind—Jew, Gentile, saint, sinner, old, young, male and—we had almost said female—are still playing it. We believe, however, that it is not now a ladies' game; but time was when the dear creatures played it with zest. It will be remembered that Ulysses was nowhere better entertained than by Alcinous, at whose court the Phæacian ladies played ball to the sound of music. Brave girls those, and no wasp-waists, we warrant.¹³

Although African American men played baseball during the late 1800s and early 1900s, they were banned from the major and minor leagues, which limited their opportunities to fashion a career from the sport. However, one of Sedalia's native sons did so in the early 1900s. William "Plunk" Drake was born in Sedalia in 1895. He "got his start with the sand lot teams on the northside and later played with the Sedalia colored ball club." From 1914 through 1917, Drake pitched for professional barnstorming teams and integrated semipro teams in North Dakota (see Table 1). During the First World War, Private Drake served in France and pitched for the 805th Pioneer Infantry Regiment in the spring of 1919. The Bearcats won all 10 of their games against other military units. After the war, Drake pitched for teams in the Negro National League through 1927, including the Kansas City Monarchs from 1922 to 1925, which included trips to the Negro League World Series in 1924 and 1925. His nickname "Plunk" referred to his habit of pitching inside to hitters in an attempt to make them uncomfortable at the plate. This resulted in Drake plunking (hitting) the batter with the ball, sometimes intentionally. After his playing days were largely behind him, he continued to occasionally play and coach into the 1940s for African American baseball teams, as well as a basketball team. In 1950, Bill Drake joined Wilber "Bullet" Rogan and Reuben "Rube" Curry on the mound for a Kansas City Monarchs "Oldtimers" team playing in a 2½-inning exhibition that preceded the final game of the regular season for the younger Monarchs and Indianapolis Clowns. Drake later worked for a decade at the Famous-Barr Department Store in St. Louis until his retirement at age 62. He passed away in St. Louis in 1977 and was buried in the Jefferson Barracks National Cemetery.¹⁴

Table 1.—Incomplete list of baseball teams on which William “Plunk” Drake pitched or managed after leaving Sedalia, Missouri.¹⁵ Drake mentioned playing and managing on other teams (in Tulsa, for example), but specific details were not found.

Year	Team	League
1914	Brown’s Tennessee Rats (Holden, MO)	<i>barnstorming team</i>
1915	Brown’s Tennessee Rats (Holden, MO)	<i>barnstorming team</i>
	Brinsmade, ND	<i>integrated semipro team</i>
	All-Nations (Kansas City, MO)	<i>barnstorming team</i>
1916	Brinsmade, ND	<i>integrated semipro team</i>
	St. Louis Giants	<i>independent team</i>
1917	Brinsmade, ND	<i>integrated semipro team</i>
	All-Nations (Kansas City, MO)	<i>barnstorming team</i>
1918	—	—
1919	805th Pioneer Infantry Regiment	<i>American Expeditionary Forces</i>
	St. Louis Giants	<i>independent team</i>
1920	St. Louis Giants	Negro National League
1921	St. Louis Giants	Negro National League
1922	St. Louis Stars	Negro National League
	Kansas City Monarchs	Negro National League
1923	Kansas City Monarchs	Negro National League
1924	Kansas City Monarchs	Negro National League
1924–1925	Los Angeles White Sox	California Winter League
1925	Kansas City Monarchs	Negro National League
1926	Indianapolis ABCs	Negro National League
	Dayton Marcos	Negro National League
	Memphis Red Sox	<i>independent team</i>
1927	Detroit Stars	Negro National League
1928	—	—
1929	—	—
1930	St. Louis Stars	Negro National League
1948	St. Louis Giants (manager)	<i>independent team</i>

Playing an irregular schedule of games was a challenge for teams, and Sedalia, like many towns, longed to be part of a league. As early as the 1880s, calls periodically went out for the organization of a Missouri Valley League or Missouri–Kansas League or Missouri State League or some similar aggregation. These proposals sometimes included cities in eastern Kansas, and many specifically included Sedalia as a possible member. As was true elsewhere in the region, these proposals rarely survived the planning stage or the early part of the season.¹⁶ The attempt in 1896 to organize a baseball league under the name Missouri State Baseball League (or Central Baseball League) progressed the farthest, but it too collapsed not long after it began. Sedalia resident Frank Eberle (no relation) had been elected president of the league, but he moved to St. Louis to write for the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*.¹⁷ Throughout this period, however, various town teams—and

railroad and African American teams—continued to represent Sedalia.¹⁸ As the new century dawned, Sedalia's fortunes in entertainment began to improve.

Composer Scott Joplin, the “King of Ragtime,” lived in Sedalia periodically around the turn of the century (1894–1901 and 1904). It was during this time that he composed several pieces of music, including one of his best known works, the *Maple Leaf Rag*, published in 1899. Joplin performed some of his compositions at the hall in Liberty Park and other sites around Sedalia.¹⁹ About this same time, baseball assumed a more prominent status in Sedalia. In 1900, the semipro town team played well, winning almost three-quarters of its games, and two of the losses came against players from the Kansas City Blues, a Class A minor league team.²⁰

The following year, there was more talk of organizing a Missouri State League or a league that also included teams in southeastern Kansas, but once again, nothing came from the discussions. Sedalia continued to play independently, but the team suffered the loss of two star players, who moved on to the minor leagues. Catcher Lee Garvin and first baseman Richard “Dick” Rohn signed with the Western League team (Class A) in St. Joseph, Missouri. Garvin went on to play in the minor leagues for 15 years, and Rohn had a 15-year minor league career as a player and manager (see Table 2).²¹

Rohn was a central Missouri native, born in Auxvasse. Before he moved to Sedalia in 1900, he played baseball for Fulton (1895–1897) and Jefferson City (1898–1899). Shortly after joining the semipro team in Sedalia, Rohn reportedly turned down an offer to play for a team in a Montana league for \$125 (equivalent to about \$3,671 in 2017) plus expenses; he preferred to stay in Missouri. In the summer of 1901, he signed with St. Joseph for \$90 (\$2,643 in 2017) plus travel expenses, but his tenure with the team was brief, and he returned to Sedalia to play first base for the town team through the end of the season. The following year, however, he was back in the minor leagues to stay, mostly with teams in Classes C and D, the two lowest levels at the time. In 1910, Rohn managed and played first base for the Joplin (Missouri) Miners of the Western Association (Class C). The team compiled a record of 90–34, and on the 100th Anniversary of Minor League Baseball in 2001, they were selected as number 66 among the 100 best minor league baseball teams. After the First World War, with his minor league career behind him, Rohn returned to his adopted hometown of Sedalia, where he worked at McLaughlin Brothers Furniture Company for 34 years. He passed away in Sedalia in 1958.²²

It was in Sedalia that Rohn's minor league career had really begun. After several false starts, the city finally fielded a minor league team from 1902 through 1905. The Sedalia Goldbugs played in the Missouri Valley League, which progressed from Class D to Class C in 1904. The following year, the Goldbugs became members of the Western Association, also Class C.²³ In 1902, Nevada (Missouri) won the league pennant, while Sedalia placed fourth among the eight teams, with a respectable record of 71–46 (.608). In 1903, the teams in Nevada and Leavenworth (Kansas) folded, dropping the league from eight to six teams in July. Springfield (Missouri) was declared the winner of the first half of the season, while Sedalia finished in fifth place, rebounding from a horrible start to compile a record of 35–29 (.547). The six remaining teams then played a second

Table 2.—Baseball teams on which Richard “Dick” Rohn played (usually at first base) and managed (captained) in the minor leagues.²⁴

Year	Team	League	Class	Player	Manager
1901	St. Joseph Saints	Western League	A	●	
1902	Sedalia Goldbugs	Missouri Valley League	D	●	
1903	Sedalia Goldbugs	Missouri Valley League	D	●	
1904	Sedalia Goldbugs	Missouri Valley League	C	●	
1905	Sedalia Goldbugs	Western Association	C	●	●
	Kansas City Blues	American Association	A	●	
1906	Webb City Goldbugs	Western Association	C	●	●
1907	Joplin Miners	Western Association	C	●	
1908	Peoria Distillers	Illinois-Indiana-Iowa League	B	●	
	Burlington Pathfinders	Central Association	D		●
1909	Macon Peaches	South Atlantic League	C	●	
	Atlanta Crackers	Southern Association	A	●	
1910	Joplin Miners	Western Association	C	●	●
1911	Burlington Pathfinders	Central Association	D	●	●
1912	Burlington Pathfinders	Central Association	D	●	●
1913	Burlington Pathfinders	Central Association	D	●	●
1914	Salina Coyotes	Kansas State League	D		●
1915	Burlington Pathfinders	Central Association	D		●

season of 70 games. Sedalia took the pennant, with a record of 52–18 (.743). In 1904, the league again had eight teams. Iola (Kansas) claimed first place, while Sedalia placed fourth, with a record of 71–52 (.577). In the Western Association the following year, Sedalia had to compete with teams from larger cities. Wichita (Kansas) won the pennant, trailed by Oklahoma City and Leavenworth. The Sedalia Goldbugs once again finished in fourth place, with a record of 70–64 (.522).²⁵ During their four years in the minor leagues, the Sedalia Goldbugs played 508 league games and had a combined record of 299–209 (.589).

The rosters of the Sedalia Goldbugs included seven players who moved on to the major leagues, but only one of them played more than a few games. A right-handed pitcher from Detroit, Michigan—Ed Reulbach (pronounced ROIL-bock)—played for the Goldbugs in 1902–1904. While playing for Sedalia, he used the pseudonym Bob Lawson from Indiana, where he was also playing for the University of Notre Dame. Use of a pseudonym by baseball players who wanted to retain eligibility to play on amateur college teams was common, as highlighted by Dwight Eisenhower’s apparent use of the name Wilson to play for money in Kansas prior to his acceptance into the US Military Academy at West Point in 1911.²⁶ In 1905, as the Goldbugs were moving to the Western Association, Reulbach moved up to the major leagues, where he played nearly 13 seasons (1905–1917) for the Chicago Cubs (8+ years), Brooklyn Superbas/Robins (now the Los Angeles Dodgers; 1+ years), Newark Pepper Statistics (Federal League; 1 year), and Boston Braves (now the Atlanta Braves; 1+ years). He closed the 1917 season and his baseball career with the Providence Grays of the International League (Class AA).

Reulbach had decent career statistics in the major leagues, pitching in 399 games, starting 300, and completing 200. He compiled a record of 182 wins (including 40 shutouts) against 106 losses (.632), with 13 saves and an earned run average (ERA) of 2.28. In 1906, Reulbach allowed only 5.33 hits per nine innings, which is still among the best in Major League Baseball. On September 26, 1908, he threw a doubleheader shutout, the only major league pitcher to accomplish this feat. Yet it was not enough for Reulbach to garner any votes for induction into the National Baseball Hall of Fame.²⁷

Three players spent all four years with the Goldbugs in Sedalia—left-handed pitcher Paul Curtis, first baseman Dick Rohn, and shortstop Billy White, none of whom made it to the major leagues. Rohn had a longer career in the minor leagues than Curtis and White, whose careers spanned six and eight years, respectively. In 1906, Rohn and White moved with the Goldbugs to Webb City (Missouri), while Curtis closed his minor league career that year with teams in Georgia and South Carolina.²⁸

During the early 1900s, Sedalia baseball fans also followed the career of hometown product Harry Suter (sometimes misspelled as Sutor).²⁹ He was born in Independence, Missouri in 1887 but grew up in Sedalia. As a talented, left-handed pitcher, Suter was in demand in Sedalia and other towns in the region, even before he graduated from high school. In 1905, after Ed Reulbach had moved on, the Sedalia Goldbugs were short on healthy pitchers, so the amateur Suter filled in. The “kid twirler,” not yet 18, pitched close games for the Goldbugs on two consecutive days in June. The following year, he left Sedalia to begin a seven-year professional career from 1906 to 1912 (see Table 3). Suter played for the Chicago White Sox in 1909, his only trip to the major leagues. He pitched 87.1 innings in 18 games (starting seven) and compiled a record of 2–3, with an earned run average (ERA) of 2.47.³⁰ After serving as a sergeant in the 166th Depot Brigade at Camp Lewis, Washington during the First World War, Suter returned to the Midwest. In 1921, he moved to Salina, Kansas, where he played for the Salina Drummers semipro team. Beginning in 1930, he enjoyed success managing youth baseball teams in Salina, and in 1933, he received permission to organize the intercity Kansas Ban Johnson League, initially composed of players under 21 years of age. The league persisted in the state through the 1950s, except during the Second World War. It continues today where it began in the Kansas City metropolitan area. In 1938, Suter helped organize the Salina Millers minor league team, an expansion club in the Western Association (Class C). Unlike most teams in the league, the Millers were not affiliated with a major league team until 1941. Suter began the 1938 season as the team’s manager, but they did not perform well, and player-managers Jack Calvey and John “Doc” Graves guided the team the rest of the summer. Suter moved to Topeka in the 1950s, where he passed away in 1971. He was buried in Assaria, Kansas, about 10 miles south of Salina.³¹

An attempt to organize a new Missouri Valley League in 1907 fell through, but Sedalia continued to be represented by independent semipro teams, usually known as the Cubs in the years leading up to the First World War. They sometimes shared the field with a white team named the Blues. There were also teams of local talent, including teams from the railroad shops, as well as the African American team.³²

Table 3.—Major league and minor league baseball teams for which Harry Suter pitched.³³

Year	Team	League (Class)
1905	Sedalia Goldbugs	Western Association (C)
1906	Austin Senators	South Texas League (C)
1907	Austin Senators	Texas League (C)
1908	San Francisco Seals	Pacific Coast League (A)
1909	Chicago White Sox	American League (MLB)
1910	San Francisco Seals	Pacific Coast League (A)
1911	San Francisco Seals	Pacific Coast League (A)
1912	San Francisco Seals	Pacific Coast League (AA)
	Portland Beavers	Pacific Coast League (AA)

Sedalia made another attempt in 1911 to field a minor league team—the Cubs—in the Missouri State League (Class D). Teams from Brookfield, Chillicothe, Jefferson City, Kirksville, and Macon joined Sedalia in organizing the new league. (Kirksville had one of the most unusual names of any team in organized baseball—the Kirksville Osteopaths—named for a local school.³⁴) Chillicothe dropped out of the league before the season began, because it could not raise sufficient funds to support the team. Attempts to recruit teams from Boonville, Mexico, and Moberly were unsuccessful. As the shaky league began its season, the Sedalia Cubs got off to a good start, winning six of their first seven games. Brookfield, on the other hand, lost all four of its games during the same period. Nonetheless, the Cubs played their last game in Sedalia on May 21. The franchise was sold to the Brookfield Amusement Association, dropping the league to only four teams. The league’s problems worsened when Jefferson City’s team decided to disband on May 26. The other three teams worked to prop up the Jefferson City team, but by the first week of June, the league had folded. The short season did not stop Macon from claiming the pennant, with a record of 10–8 (.556), followed by Jefferson City (11–9, .550), Kirksville (9–13, .409), and Brookfield (4–9, .308).³⁵

After the First World War, Sedalia was represented most years by the Athletics, although a local newspaper initially referred to the team in May 1919 as the Cubs. It was also the Athletics who represented Sedalia during the first season at the “new” (1938) grandstand in Liberty Park still in use today.³⁶ In addition to the Athletics, a team of railroad employees sponsored by the Missouri Pacific Boosters represented Sedalia several years between the world wars. During some years, both the town team and the railroad team were active, and they played each other for the city championship. In 1936, a night game between the two teams drew 2,500 fans and sparked interest in a revival of baseball under the lights, which had faded since its introduction in 1930. However, in 1937, the Missouri Pacific Boosters switched from baseball to softball. The Boosters also sponsored an African American team that played at Hubbard Park in Sedalia. At the time, the municipal parks were segregated. Sedalia’s Missouri Pacific Boosters also sponsored a band, a basketball team, a bowling team, and a soccer team.³⁷

Following the Second World War, Sedalia town teams sometimes reorganized under the old names of Cubs and Athletics.³⁸ Since 2009, Sedalia has been represented at Liberty Park Stadium by the Sedalia Bombers, a collegiate summer league team affiliated with the MINK League (Missouri, Iowa, Nebraska, and Kansas League). Despite the league's name, the eight teams in 2017 included seven from Missouri and one from Clarinda, Iowa.³⁹ Collegiate summer league teams consist of players who retain their amateur status (and play under their actual names), allowing them to also participate in college sports. The combination of the college and summer league schedules provides these players with a season comparable in duration to the minor leagues. While playing in the summer league, the players use wooden bats, as in the minor leagues, rather than the metal bats used by college teams. In the case of the Bombers, the team also gets to play in front of Liberty Park's historic wooden grandstand.

From Sicher's Park to Liberty Park

The long-term baseball grounds in Sedalia were established at Sicher's Park in 1881. After a decade under that name, the Missouri State Fair Association arranged to buy the park for \$30,000 in the spring of 1890 (equivalent to about \$815,778 in 2017); however, there was some question as to who actually purchased the property. Nonetheless, it was then referred to as Association Park, but only for a few years. To satisfy unpaid promissory notes, the land was again sold in December 1893 for \$35,000 (\$951,741 in 2017), but the site usually was still referred to as Association Park. That changed in the spring of 1898. Following a somewhat contentious special election, the city arranged to purchase the property for \$21,500 (\$631,412 in 2017) to serve as a public park. This raised the question as to what name should be used—the original Sicher's Park, the short-lived Association Park, or perhaps City Park. The city council settled the issue by passing an ordinance establishing the name Liberty Park (at the time, the country was involved in the Spanish-American War, which had begun that April). The council also established a governing board of nine park commissioners.⁴⁰

From the beginning, Sicher's Park hosted a variety of events, including horse races. A grandstand was provided for spectators at these events, and a separate baseball "amphitheater" was added by the end of the park's first decade.⁴¹ As with most wooden seating, the structure was periodically repaired and rebuilt. What was referred to as a grandstand for the baseball diamond—probably an uncovered bleacher—was constructed in 1899. The city park board provided the lumber at no charge. The material came from a section of the amphitheater in the park that was torn down after being damaged during a windstorm. Funds were solicited from the community to pay for construction. Local architect Thomas W. Bast provided plans and specifications for a seating area 75 feet long to be constructed at a cost of \$94 (\$2,761 in 2017).⁴² On the morning of August 27, 1900, strong winds associated with a torrential rainstorm blew through Sedalia, downing hundreds of trees and damaging or destroying numerous buildings around the city. The grandstand for the racetrack in Liberty Park collapsed, but the baseball seating survived, although the canvas fence around the ballpark was "torn into ribbons."⁴³

Additional wooden grandstands took their turns at Liberty Park in the coming years, and these later structures had roofs. Another windstorm in late summer 1905 (the final year for the Sedalia Goldbugs) tore off the roofs of the baseball and racetrack grandstands. This led to calls for a new combined grandstand to be used by spectators at both the baseball games and the races sponsored by the Gentlemen's Driving Club (horse racing club). That October, local architect August Helfert prepared plans and specifications for a possible new grandstand at Liberty Park to be submitted to the city council. The plans called for a grandstand 200 feet long and 36 feet deep that would seat more than 1,500 people, "a structure that would be a credit to Greater Sedalia." However, it was up to the city council "to say whether the stand will be an elaborate affair or constructed on a cheap scale." The cost, including the reuse of lumber from the existing structures, was estimated to be \$2,400 (\$70,483 in 2017). While generally supportive, city council members were concerned that the expense would strain city coffers, and they referred the proposal to various committees for additional study that dragged on through the winter and following spring. The city council finally resolved the matter in May 1906 and, on a vote of five to three, approved construction of the new grandstand under the direction of the park board.⁴⁴

Plans from three architects were reviewed, and the plan presented by Thomas W. Bast, designer of the 1899 structure, was selected. The new grandstand would seat 1,100–1,200 people. The existing grandstand on the north side of the racetrack was to be taken down and any good lumber was to be reused in the new grandstand on the south side of the track. Bids for the project had to be submitted by May 31, and the grandstand was to be completed by July 1. However, in August the new grandstand was still not ready for the painters. The delay was caused by difficulty in obtaining additional lumber from sawmills. Once completed, the new grandstand was 160 feet long and 40 feet deep, with three stairways. The final cost was \$2,800 (\$82,230 in 2017), with \$2,668.15 paid to contractor S. R. Dameron and \$131.85 paid to architect T. W. Bast. A bill presented to the city council by architect August Helfert for preparing the earlier plans and specifications for a new grandstand in the autumn of 1905 was rejected unanimously.⁴⁵

Fire was always a looming threat to wooden grandstands. In April 1925, Sedalia fire companies were called to Liberty Park when a discarded cigarette started a fire in trash under the baseball grandstand. Fortunately, it was not damaged.⁴⁶ That spring, repairs were made to the grandstand and diamond, which had been moved 15 feet closer to the grandstand in 1919 "so that spectators can get a closer view of the base plays." The work in 1925 included repainting signs on the outfield fence and building new ticket booths. Wire netting six feet high was installed on top of the grandstand to prevent some of the valuable baseballs from leaving the field, and new wire netting was placed across the front of the grandstand to protect spectators. The team management also promised to have the "grandstand cleaned every Sunday before games."⁴⁷ Two years later, a spring storm damaged the roof of the baseball grandstand. In addition to repairing the roof, other repairs were made to the structure. Yet another fire was started in 1927 by a cigar



Above: Grandstand at Liberty Park Stadium, Sedalia, Missouri.

Right: Rafters and seating area at Liberty Park Stadium.

Photographs by the author, 2014.



or cigarette discarded on boards stored beneath the grandstand, but local fire companies extinguished the flames, with only minor damage to the structure.⁴⁸

The Sedalia Athletic Association sponsored a dance and carnival at the Liberty Park Convention Hall in May 1929 to support the team and provide funds to repay the city park board for a portion of the costs incurred working on the surface of the ballfield and repairing the grandstand.⁴⁹ That same year, the city worked with the Sedalia All-Stars, the local African American team, to improve Hubbard Park and give “the colored people of Sedalia a real ball park.” The city grader leveled the field, and wooden seating for 200 people was constructed. Local merchants also donated money to the All-Stars to purchase uniforms.⁵⁰

During the early 1930s, the usual annual repairs were made to the baseball field and grandstand at Liberty Park, but the condition of the grandstand was deteriorating. Following a baseball game in 1932, a woman fell about six feet when the wooden steps at the southern end of the grandstand collapsed. She suffered sprains to her hand and leg, and the city council later awarded her \$1,506.50 (\$26,977 in 2017).⁵¹ The biggest change to the ballpark at this time, though, was the organization of the Sedalia Nighttime Baseball Association in 1930, who brought baseball under electric lights to Liberty Park. The lights were placed on six pine poles 83 feet tall (plus another 12 feet below ground), each with ten 1,500-watt lights, some of which were positioned to increase the lighted ceiling another 25–30 feet. The first night game was played on July 8, when the Boonville American Legion team defeated the Sedalia Athletics, 4–2, at a packed Liberty Park. A local newspaper published photographs of the game at the old grandstand, which was a straight structure of at least seven sections, with a roof that had a gable and cupola over the center section.⁵² As elsewhere, night baseball proved popular, and the following year, a set of bleachers was added to accommodate the overflow of spectators that exceeded the capacity of the grandstand. The electric lights were also reinstalled.⁵³

In 1937, a new grandstand was approved for construction at the Liberty Park ball diamond. The city council agreed to contribute \$1,500 to the \$5,000 Works Progress Administration (WPA) project (\$25,493 of \$84,976 in 2017). The new grandstand was to be a curved structure, with a dugout, washrooms, and dressing rooms. To accommodate the construction work expected to begin in the spring, the Sedalia Athletics would have to start their season on the road. Softball games, on the other hand, could be played at the park, because that sport used a smaller field. They would simply move home plate several feet north, away from the grandstand, and set up the temporary bleachers used during football games along the first and third base lines. However, an agreement was reached to delay construction of the grandstand until later in the year, after the baseball and softball seasons were completed. In May, the field was put into shape, the lights were installed, and a new fence was constructed, but the old grandstand was left standing through the end of August.⁵⁴ Work on the new grandstand began late that summer and continued into May 1938. The new ballpark was dedicated at the first game that spring. Unfortunately, the Athletics lost to their old rivals, Jefferson City, 3-0.⁵⁵

Games continued in front of the grandstand at Liberty Park, with minor annual repairs and occasional major repairs and painting, but in 1946, the diamond was moved 10 feet farther away from the grandstand.⁵⁶ In 2011, the name of the ballpark was changed to Dey Field at Liberty Park Stadium to honor Ross Dey, in particular, but the Dey family, in general, who had been associated with Sedalia baseball since 1950.⁵⁷

Appendix

In addition to Liberty Park Stadium, the state of Missouri has three other baseball parks with grandstands constructed during the Great Depression through the Works Progress Administration (WPA). All three have hosted minor league teams, but none does today. They are highlighted here for baseball enthusiasts who may wish to visit them.

Carl Lewton Stadium (1938), Carthage, Missouri

From a Civil War battlefield to Route 66, Carthage has several historical sites, one of which is its baseball park. The WPA built the uncovered grandstand of locally quarried rock and concrete.⁵⁸ The ballpark was originally referred to as either Municipal Stadium or Rock Stadium, but it was later named for a local teacher, coach, and umpire. Carthage hosted minor league teams in 1891, 1938-1941, and 1946-1951.⁵⁹



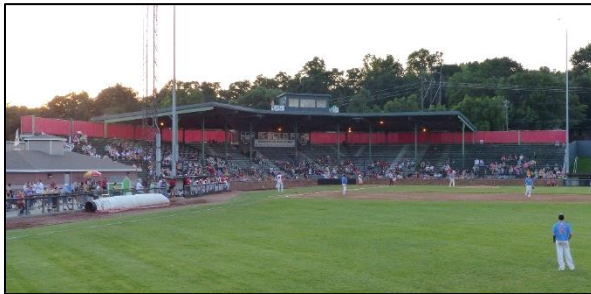
Clemens Field (1939), Hannibal, Missouri

First built in 1924, Hannibal's ballpark was named for local icon Samuel Clemens (Mark Twain). A fire destroyed the original grandstand in 1936, but it was rebuilt by the WPA during 1937–1939. The grandstand was constructed of steel and concrete, and covered by an asphalt roof supported by steel columns. The ballpark, which is listed on the National Register of Historic Places, was restored and renovated in 2008 at a cost of over \$3 million.⁶⁰ The bench seats were replaced with folding stadium seats. Many old ballparks were constructed near streams or railroads—or both in the case of Clemens Field. The railroad tracks between the stadium and the creek are at the bottom of the photo. Trains slowly pass almost within touching distance of the stone wall surrounding the playing field on the first base side. Hannibal hosted minor league teams in 1908–1912, 1916–1917, 1947–1948, and 1952–1955.⁶¹ In 2009, a summer collegiate league team—the Hannibal Cavemen—began playing at Clemens Field.



Phil Welch Stadium (1939), St. Joseph, Missouri

Home to the eastern terminus of the Pony Express of 1860–1861, St. Joseph also has a historic steel and concrete grandstand, with a roof over the central section and a brick backstop. It was built by a local contractor through the WPA in 10 weeks during the spring of 1939. The municipal stadium was named in 1964 for St. Joseph's former mayor (1936–1946).⁶² St. Joseph hosted minor league teams in 1886–1887, 1889, 1893–1898, 1900–1906, 1910–1927, 1930–1935, 1939–1941, 1946–1951, 1953–1954, and 2006–2007.⁶³ As in Sedalia and Hannibal, a summer collegiate league team—the Mustangs—began playing at Phil Welch Stadium in 2009.



Acknowledgements

I enjoy attending baseball games at historic ballparks, especially collegiate league or minor league games, in which wooden bats are used. I use the term “historic ballparks” to refer to stadiums with grandstands constructed prior to the Second World War. Baseball fields established from the mid-1800s through the early 1900s that have no seating or only modern seating have historical value, but my focus is on ballfields that also feature historic grandstands. Kansas, Missouri, and other states in the heart of the country have some of the finest examples of historic baseball parks in the nation. This monograph is my tribute to the remaining historic ballparks in Missouri, where I have enjoyed watching collegiate summer league games in Hannibal, St. Joseph, and Sedalia.

I thank Jan Johnson and Joe Tomelleri for reading the manuscript to check its general readability, but I am solely responsible for any errors in facts or interpretations. In addition, Jan provided information about Harry Suter, and Joe traveled to Sedalia with me to watch a collegiate summer league ballgame. I examined newspapers online through Newspapers.com, NewspaperArchive.com, and the State Historical Society of Missouri Digital Collections (<http://digital.shsmo.org/cdm/>). Dollar equivalents were estimated with the formula at <https://www.minneapolisfed.org/community/teaching-aids/cpi-calculator-information/consumer-price-index-1800> (accessed 29 October 2017). I took all the photographs used in this monograph.

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- ⁵³ *Sedalia Capital*, 8 May 1931, p 8; 12 May 1931, p 6. • *Sedalia Democrat*, 7 May 1931, p 3; 11 May 1931, p 4.
- ⁵⁴ *Sedalia Democrat*, 2 March 1937, p 1; 4 April 1937, p 6; 9 April 1937, p 1; 18 April 1937, p 7; 25 May 1937, p 10; 10 August 1937, p 1; 1 September 1937, p 6.
- ⁵⁵ *Sedalia Democrat*, 6 March 1938, p 9; 20 March 1938, p 11; 3 April 1938, p 9; 9 May 1938, p 5.
- ⁵⁶ *Sedalia Democrat*, 31 March 1946, p 8; 4 June 1946, p 5; 15 June 1947, p 4; 16 October 1949, p 13; 14 April 1950, p 1, 6; 22 March 1953, p 17; 4 July 1954, p 8; 23 March 1958, p 29; 25 March 1958, p 2; 23 May 1965, p 29; 7 March 1974, p 15; 4 April 1976, p 25.

⁵⁷ Imhauser (2013:103).

⁵⁸ *Digital Ballparks, Carl Lewton Stadium*, <http://digitalballparks.com/KOM/CarlLewton.html> (accessed 15 October 2017).

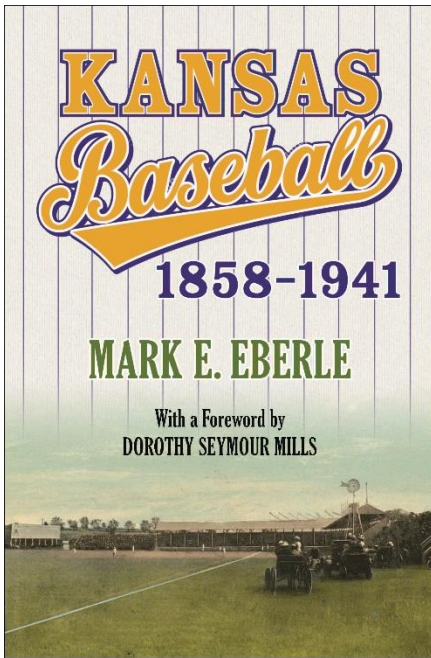
⁵⁹ *Carthage, Missouri Encyclopedia*, Baseball-Reference.com.

⁶⁰ *Hannibal Parks and Recreation, Clemens Field*, <http://www.hannibalparks.org/facilities/clemens-field/> (accessed 15 October 2017). • *National Register of Historic Places Registration Form, Clemens Field*, <https://dnr.mo.gov/shpo/nps-nr/08000807.pdf> (accessed 15 October 2017).

⁶¹ *Hannibal, Missouri Encyclopedia*, Baseball-Reference.com.

⁶² *History of Phil Welch Stadium ↔ Baseball in St. Joseph*, <http://www.stjoemustangs.com/stadium/history/> (accessed 15 October 2017).

⁶³ *St. Joe, Missouri Encyclopedia*, Baseball-Reference.com. • *St. Joseph, Missouri Encyclopedia*, Baseball-Reference.com.



You can learn more about the early history of baseball as played by local teams in Kansas (and adjacent states) in the book *Kansas Baseball, 1858-1941*, published in 2017 by the University Press of Kansas and available in paperback or e-book through bookstores and online retailers.

The book explores the early game played by hundreds of town teams composed of white males, as well as teams of women, African Americans, American Indians, and Mexican Americans. Also described are the regional minor leagues and major league tours, along with the histories of nine towns still playing baseball in the state's oldest ballparks constructed between 1924 and 1940.