Constructing the Past

Volume 11 | Issue 1 Article 6

2010

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Recommended Citation
Vorel, Lauren M. (2010) "The Great Depression: Catalyst for Change in America's Game," *Constructing the Past*: Vol. 11: Iss. 1, Article 6.
Available at: http://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/constructing/vol11/iss1/6

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The Great Depression: Catalyst for Change in America's Game

Lauren Vorel

On October 29, 1929, afterwards known as Black Tuesday, the stock market crashed. The collapse of the stock market marked the beginning of the Great Depression, a severe economic depression whose effects lasted until around the late 1930s. The Depression had a severe impact on nearly every country. The effects of the Great Depression in the United States were extensive, affecting the living conditions of Americans across the nation. Baseball, America's pastime, was likewise hit hard by the economic downturn. Many Americans were less able to participate in leisure activities and could not afford the ticket price of baseball games, decreasing attendance drastically. Through the inception of the all star game, night baseball, radio broadcasting, and the farm system, the Great Depression ultimately had a modernizing effect on America's pastime.

The major effect of the Great Depression on baseball was a decrease in attendance at professional baseball games. Because of the Depression, people had less money available for leisure activities. Baseball games were a luxury that could no longer be afforded by the common American. In the seasons of 1931 and 1932, "gate levels plunged 70 percent from the figures of 1930… and the majors would not reach the 10 million attendance mark again for sixteen years."[1] The situation was not improved by the fact that the major leagues refused to lower ticket prices. The reasoning for this, as explained by president of the American League William Harridge, was that "during the boom period baseball made no attempt to take advantage of easy money."[2] This logic only further decreased the amount of fans that were able to attend the games. As ticket sales plummeted, baseball owners made a variety of attempts to raise fan interest in the game, some of which had a lasting impact on the game.

One attempt to raise attendance at baseball games was the official creation of the all-star game. The game was predicted to raise fan interest tremendously, as all of the baseball stars of the day would be competing together. The all-star game, dubbed the "game of the century," was predicted

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[1] Robert Fredrick Burk, *Much more than a game : players, owners, & American baseball since 1921*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001,) 41.

[2] By The Associated Press, 1932, "Major Leagues Will Not Cut Ticket Prices Because They Were Not Raised in Boom Times," New York Times (1857-Current file), January 16, http://www.proquest.com/ (accessed November 18, 2009).

to draw a crowd of 49,000 fans.[3] As predicted, the game was extremely popular with the fans. John Drebinger went as far as to say "for not in many years has a single encounter aroused so much keen and decidedly partisan enthusiasm."[4] The game was even called "the only constructive original idea which has been introduced into the baseball industry since the invention of the recording turnstile."[5] The first major league all-star game brought spectator interest back to the sport of baseball at a time when it was difficult to afford such activities. At times, taking an active role in the all-star games was hard to pass up. Fans had the opportunity to vote for the players they felt deserved to be on the team, and the Chicago Tribune began "awarding $500 in cash prizes to the fans who come closest to naming the teams."[6] During the Depression, a time of great financial hardship, cash incentives and the thrill of seeing the best players in the game made it difficult for fans to not be interested in the games. All-star games continue to attract the interest of baseball fans even today. Today, the major league all-star game is a tradition in the sport, played about halfway through every season. Now a staple of the sport, the game of baseball was born out of the Great Depression and the slump in fan attendance that it created.

Another ploy by the owners to raise attendance during the Depression-era was the inception of night baseball, although not everyone approved of this trend. Even though baseball had been played sporadically under artificial lighting since the 1880s, it was not until the Great Depression that night baseball became a more common practice.[7] Many older fans did not approve of night baseball because they believed that baseball was meant to be played during the day. For example, in 1939, a fan wrote to the New York

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[3] John Drebinger. Special to THE NEW YORK TIMES. 1933. ALL-STARS ON EDGE FOR BATTLE TODAY :Capacity Crowd of 49,000 Is Assured When National and American Leaguers Meet. INTEREST HIGH IN CHICAGO Mack to Pit Foremost Hitters of Game Against Sterling Players Led by McGraw.. New York Times (1857-Current file), July 6, http://www.proquest.com/ (accessed December 1, 2009).

[4] Ibid.

[5] Westbrook Pegler, "All-Star Game Just What Doctor Ordered for Baseball :All Star Game Is Real Tonic for Baseball," *Chicago Daily Tribune* June 20, http://www.proquest.com/ (accessed December 1, 2009).

[6] "First Returns on American League's All Star Lineup," 1933, *Chicago Daily Tribune*, May 24, http://www.proquest.com/ (accessed December 3, 2009).

[7] Benjamin G. Rader, *Baseball*: *A History of America's Game*, 3rd ed, (Urbana, IL and Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2008), 151.

Times, saying, "it seems to me that when an old codger has survived all of 100 Summers, mostly in sunshine, despite four major wars, including a Civil War and a World War... he is faring rather well under the rays emanating from Old Sol and his night life ought not be his due at this time of life."[8] However, this opinion is not representative of the majority of fans, who mostly supported night baseball. Night games increased attendance at games for a couple of reasons. The major reason was that baseball spectators could not afford to skip work to see a baseball game during the day. The Sporting News concluded, "men are not going to quit their tasks during the week to go to ball games, but a vast majority of them would welcome a chance to go in the evenings to relax."[9] Night games also heightened fan interest because they were commonly seen as a novelty by the fans. The idea of baseball being played at night represented a fresh development in a classic game. For these reasons, night games did experience a dramatic increase in attendance relative to day games. In one instance, the Indianapolis Baseball Club's attendance for the first ten afternoon games of the season was 785 paid admissions. After lighting equipment was installed, the attendance at the first ten night games was 2,705 paid admissions, over triple the attendance at the day games.[10] In another case, the Dodgers drew 38,000 fans at one game and 28,000 fans at another night game against Pittsburgh. The New York Times reported that "it takes several weekday crowds for any club to match those Sunday figure totals."[11] Based on the evidence of the great popularity of night baseball, Harridge predicted, "night baseball is coming to the majors, there's no question about it."[12] His prediction was correct. Night baseball became, and remains to this day, an important part of major league baseball.

Radio broadcasting of baseball game also became more popular partly because of the Great Depression. Because many people could not afford tickets to the game, listening to the radio was the only way that some fans could

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[8] Alexander, S. Askins D.D.S., Letters to the Sports Editor :ABOUT THE ALL-STAR GAME, *New York Times*, July 15, http://www.proquest.com/ (accessed December 5, 2009).

[9] Ibid.

[10] "Indianapolis Night Games Triple Attendance Figures," 1930, *New York Times*, July 20, http://www.proquest.com.proxy.iwu.edu/ (accessed November 25, 2009).

[11] "Night Baseball Trent Is Seen By Harridge in Major Leagues :American Circuit Head Believes Play Under Lights Soon Will Become Standard for All--Points Out Change in Stand A Financial Boon Can Fill Night Schedule." *New York Times*, July 3 1938, http://www.proquest.com.proxy.iwu.edu/ (accessed November 25, 2009).

[12] Ibid

follow their favorite teams. And although some owners insisted that broadcasting games on the radio would hurt attendance by causing people to listen to the game rather than go to the ballpark, the evidence suggests that radio broadcasting actually helped attendance. Playing the games on the radio increased interest in the team, causing more spectators to go to the games. For example, when the St. Louis Cardinals prohibited broadcasting of the 1934 season, attendance levels dropped to 283,000 below that of the 1931 championship season.[13] In December 1932, the Chicago Tribune made a strong argument for the broadcasting of baseball games to the general public, stating, "there are many who cannot afford baseball... Their interest is maintained by air reports which they have the time to hear if not the money to go to the Sheffield avenue grounds. None can tell us they will not be at the windows to buy tickets when conditions change." The article also insisted that "persons within a fifty mile radius or even farther are made baseball fans by radio broadcasts."[14] So, radio broadcasting of baseball benefited attendance in two ways: by sustaining the interest of those who could not afford tickets, and by creating new fans to attend games. Although the broadcasting of major league games helped raise attendance in the major leagues, it was believed to be detrimental to the minor leagues. In 1936, Harridge reported that "the club owners of minor league clubs have protested to Landis and Bramham that their fans were listening to major league broadcasts rather than attending the minor league games."[15] Although they may be harmful to the minor leagues, radio broadcasts have also remained popular to this day, still creating new fans and sustaining old fans' interest in the game.

The farm system was also developed in response to the Great Depression. The farm system allowed major league teams to develop ballplayers in the minor league teams and draft them up to the majors, instead of having to complete expensive trades with other major league teams for already developed ballplayers. In this way, the financially strapped ball clubs could save money. Although initially strongly opposed to farm systems, Commissioner Kenesaw Mountain Landis eventually accepted the idea, "satisfied that he had done something toward protecting minor league

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[13] *Baseball: A History of America's Game*, 151.

[14] In the WAKE of the NEWS :BASEBALL BROADCASTS, *Chicago Daily Tribune*, December 20 1932, http://www.proquest.com.proxy.iwu.edu/ (accessed November 28, 2009).

[15] LANDIS SEEKS CURB ON BROADGASTING :Further Commitments to Put Ball Games on Air Banned at Minors' Request. ATTENDANCE IS SUFFERING Telegraphic Descriptions of Big League Contests 'Ruinous' to Minors, Says Harridge, *New York Times*, April 29 1936, http://www.proquest.com.proxy.iwu.edu/ (accessed November 27, 2009).

players." Farm systems proved to be highly successful and cost-efficient. For example, in 1940, Edward Burns predicted that the Chicago White Sox "may be clipping fat coupons once more next spring on low cost investments in player material." Burns went on to say that "the answer may be in Billy Webb's fine handling of their budding minor league farm system rather than the sharpshooting of Dykes in the trade marts."[16] The White Sox had built their team with players from their farm system, as opposed trading for players from other organizations. This is just one example of the success of an organized farm system. In fact, farm systems continue to be used highly successfully in professional baseball today. Major league teams develop young players in the minor leagues, cutting down the costs of having to buy players from other organizations.

The Great Depression had a devastating impact on the United States, economically and socially. The quality of life of many Americans was drastically decreased. As so many Americans struggled financially during this time, many were unable to afford tickets to go to baseball games. Naturally, attendance plunged and professional baseball attempted to raise fans' interest in the games through a variety of alterations to the game. The inauguration of the all-star game, night baseball, radio broadcasting of games, and the farm system were all used by the owners in order to bring more revenue into the club, whether by cutting down spending, or by bringing more fans to the ballpark. All of these concepts, established in the 1930s, are still prevalent in professional baseball today. Therefore, although the Great Depression was detrimental at the time, it ultimately caused a variety of innovations in America's pastime that have modernized the game.

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[16] Edward Burns, "White Sox Pin Hopes on Five More Farm System Products," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, December 15 1940, http://www.proquest.com/ (accessed December 1, 2009).