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TAKE ME OUT TO THE BALL GAME:
THE EFFECT THAT BASEBALL PLAYED ON THE MINING COMMUNITY IN
THE FOUR STATES DURING THE 1940s AND 1950s

Trey Derryberry
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The miners of the four state area lived a life of extreme hardships. Every morning wives, sons, and daughters would say good bye to their fathers hoping that this would not be the last time they saw their loved ones. This was the life of a miner family, with such horrible working conditions in the mining field people dealt and copped with death every day. Miners often came down with diseases because of the conditions. Syphilis, silicosis, and tuberculosis were not uncommon.¹ It was hard work with little pay, but it was an honest living that could support a family in these rough economic times of the mid-1940s.

This was a period before televisions, video games, and internet. People weren't taking fancy vacations all around the world. It was a much simpler life one that relied on outside activities to clear the head of the stresses of everyday life for the miners. With a limited budget miner families took "staycations" which simply meant a family vacation but doing this trip close to home. With most families on small budgets this was very popular amongst the working class of the four state area.

The area offered great recreation opportunities for the people in the mining community. For the people living in and or around Miami, Oklahoma this was a great spot for members of the family to spend time together. Miami was just one of the mining towns that offered swimming pools, golf courses, theaters, and hotels. The Miami Municipal pool was 100 feet in width and 250 feet in length, making it the biggest in the area. The pool was about one foot deep on one side gradually getting to the depth of nine feet on the other end. If swimming didn't sound fun at the time a family could go watch a movie together. There were four local movie theatres in Miami the Coleman, Glory-B, Ottawa, and the Tri-State Drive In. The Coleman theatre was the finest in Oklahoma, having a capacity of 1,600. Glory-B and the Ottawa theatres

¹Arrell, M. Gibson, "Tri-State District Social Conditions," Wilderness Bonanza: The Tri State District of Missouri, Kansas, and Oklahoma, and Oklahoma. Oklahoman Press, 1972.

had seating capacity of 800 and 400 people respectively. The Tri-State Drive In could hold 500 cars, making it the biggest drive in movie complex in the area.

If the boys wanted to get out on their own for a man's day out, he could hit the links at the Rockdale Golf Course. This course is conveniently located within the limits of the city, and has one of the sportiest golf courses in Oklahoma, with splendidly kept grass greens. With mining families I can imagine that getting out of the house and traveling down the road a ways was such a thrill. But staying the night in a Hotel must have been even more of a thrill for the kids, Mom, and probably even Dad. Miami offered a variety of unique hotels that people could stay at while in the city. The first was Hotel Miami which offered 150 completely air-cooled rooms, all modern with telephone connections. There was a coffee shop, banquet room, private dining room, and spacious lobby. The second hotel Miami offered was Hotel Main. This hotel was a little smaller than Hotel Miami, having only 106 rooms. They were all modern with telephone connections. Hotel Main also had a coffee shop.²

With all these fun family events that the miners and their families could do close to home there was one family outing that rose above all others. Professional football was only played on Sunday without T.V. coverage. Professional baseball was "the only game in town" and it was being offered in every state in the union except Vermont, and Wyoming.³ This was the biggest show in the cities of the mining community, the American past time. Baseball was king and it was revered by the miner's families in the late 1940s and early 1950s.

² Industrial Prospectus Miami, Oklahoma, Colo Research INC. Hotel Miami, Miami, Oklahoma, Prepared by The Miami Chamber of Commerce Miami, Oklahoma, September 1, 1950. The Picher Collection, Pittsburg State University Library, Archives, Pittsburg Kansas.

³ John, G. Hall, *The KOM League Remembered*, Charleston, SC: Aracadia Publishing, 2004.

Eliel Lanyon Dale of Carthage, Missouri was the primary force in the formation of the KOM league. In order to ensure the sufficient funds were available for the operation of the league, Dale served the entire time without any type of compensation.⁴ He was a true baseball fan. The KOM league stands for Kansas – Oklahoma – Missouri. These states had towns that were represented in the baseball league. Initially there were six towns involved in the KOM league Bartlesville, OK, Carthage, MO, Chanute, KS, Iola, KS, Miami, OK, and Pittsburg, KS.⁵ For the people in and around these communities this must have been such an exciting time for them. It was treated as if these towns just received their own professional baseball organization. The anticipation for the spring and Inaugural season must have been through the roof.

In 1946 the KOM league was under way in its first minor league baseball season. There were six teams involved with a couple being sponsored by major league baseball clubs, the first being the Carthage Cardinals who were affiliated with their home state team St. Louis Cardinals. The second KOM League team sponsored by a major league team was the Iola Cubs, sponsored by the Chicago Cubs who were the home town favorite in the “Windy City.” Also the Pittsburg Browns who were a minor league baseball club for the then St. Louis Browns, who were the home town rival of the St. Louis Cardinals playing their games at Sportsmen Park.⁶ Now just imagine being a member of the mining community and hearing the news that their hometown team is being sponsored by a major league ball club. The Miners got the chance to watch very good baseball, and future stars of your favorite professional team. For the people who have had a

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

lot of hardships, and negatives in life this must have been glaring shine of home for the miners and their families as well as the people in the community.

One of the great aspects that the KOM League brought to the mining community in this area was the fact the people who lived in these six towns could take these young ballplayers in for the summer months. In order for the ballplayers to save money because of such little pay while participating in the minor league system families would offer their homes in chance to meet America's next top baseball talent. For the youngsters at home this must have been something else because they would get the chance to meet these baseball players up close and personal. In all reality it would not have mattered if they were the best ball player or not. These were professionals to the kids.

Having a small budget to start out with taking another person in the house must have been such a financial burden. But this was a break from reality for the families, a break from the struggles of everyday life. This was an opportunity to meet someone from outside the mining life, and a chance to look at life from a much softer side through these young men playing baseball. The mothers of the household would do their laundry just as if they were their own child at home. This was the melting pot of the beauty of the "lowest rung" of national pastime. The townsfolk adopted these young men, took them into their homes and hearts, and it was a relationship that lasted many years after the young men left that city and, eventually, baseball.⁷

In the spring of 1947 the KOM League began its second season in the four state area. The league added two more clubs the Independence Yankees, and Ponca City Dodgers. These two minor league teams would be associated with baseball's two most powerful ball teams at this time. Independence and Ponca City would later on and dominate the KOM league for the next several years. Just a few months prior these two teams Major League affiliates New York

⁷ *Ibid.*

Yankees, and Brooklyn Dodgers met in the World Series.⁸ Setting up a rivalry that would continue with the two organizations meeting in the fall classic, five out of the next six years.

This year the KOM league drew 372,100, providing an all-time high 352 players jobs.⁹ The club leading the league in attendance was the Miami Owls, previously the Miami Blues. Miami had the nicest complex for watching baseball games. The Blues played their homes games in Miami Municipal Grandstands.¹⁰ This complex had a seating capacity of 3,200 hundred people. This stadium was not only home to baseball saddle horse shows, horse races, rodeos, and football games were enjoyed at Municipal stadium.¹¹ Many of the towns had fairly new ball parks for their teams to play in because most were built by the WPA during World War II at height of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's "New Deal" policies.

Carl Lewton Stadium in Carthage, Missouri, is just one of the parks still being used today. The "Rock" as it is nicknamed because the walls of the stadium are built out of rocks serves a host to high school baseball games today. Nearly seventy years since its establishment in the early 1940s. Great baseball and nice parks were just some of the hand full of reasons why the miners ate up the chance to see minor league baseball being played in the KOM league. This also gave families a safe clean spot to take the kids out to the ole ball game.

Another year had passed and it is again time for baseball to begin in the KOM. The third season in 1948 offered a combination that must have sent excitement throughout the area.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Industrial Prospectus Miami, Oklahoma, Colo Research INC. Hotel Miami, Miami, Oklahoma, Prepared by The Miami Chamber of Commerce Miami, Oklahoma, September 1, 1950. The Picher Collection, Pittsburg State University Library, Archives, Pittsburg Kansas.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

Kenton and Cloyd Boyer were two brothers from the small town of Alba, Missouri.¹² Both were primed to begin their descent on a major league baseball dream. This was the first time in the small life span of the league that the stars were considered home town kids. Both Kenton and Cloyd would go on and fulfill their child hood dream and make it to the major leagues.¹³ I can hardly imagine the impact that these two brothers had on the community not only in their home town of Alba a huge mining district, but throughout all towns associated in the KOM league.

These two brothers must have been revered by the kids giving them more hope of escaping the destiny that their fathers fell into going into mining. The Boyer brothers had to been heroes to the younger generation they were living the dream that every American boy had in the early 20th century. The men of the area in all estimations must have rooted for these young ball players because they were living their dreams through Kenton and Cloyd. These were two young men that could escape the revolving door that families endured in mining they had a future, a direction in life. Something that was very rare in the mining community as this point in time. Whether people came for the Boyer brothers or for the just the love of the game it should in attendance breaking the last year's record with 387,980.¹⁴

In early 1949 the KOM League was about to start its fourth season of baseball.¹⁵ Expectations must have been at an all-time high in the four states. Hometown heroes of Alba, Missouri Kenton and Cloyd Boyer were gone to the major leagues the fans of the league were in search of the next baseball star they could say they watched play for or against their hometown

¹² - - - *The KOM League Remembered*, Charleston, SC: Aracadia Publishing, 2004.

¹³ *Ibid*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

teams. "With Joe Lewis on the retired list, Ezzard Charles defeated Jersey Joe for Wolcott for the World Heavy weight title on June 22, 1949. Ten days prior to that a five foot ten, hundred sixty pound shortstop from the Baxter Springs, Kansas "Whiz Kids" had been signed by the New York Yankees and played his first professional game at Chanute, Kansas for the Independence Yankees. Of course, that was Mickey Mantle."¹⁶

From day one the word was out on this super star from Oklahoma, people flocked to the ball park to get the opportunity to watch baseball next legend. When working in terrible conditions all day doing intense work and not necessary knowing if this is your last day to live the excitement of finally getting home to your wife and kids and then taking them to the ball game supposable getting to watch baseballs next big thing was greater than any medication that any doctor could prescribe to these miners and their families.

As the Boyer brothers had done before Mickey Mantle it gave the people in the four state area another home town hero to look up to and be proud of. With the Boyer brothers being supremely popular among the mining community Mantle must have been that popular if not more. It's important to remember though at this point in time Mickey was not yet the ball player and legend that we know of him today. He had not played a single game at Yankee Stadium or won any World Series. He was talked up throughout the area as the next big thing in baseball but had not won the heart of Americans yet.

Still this young kid from Oklahoma was playing baseball signing a major league contract for the New York Yankees. He was living the dream not just young boys in Joplin, Carthage, Pittsburg, and Miami but throughout the nation. Someone that came from this area of mining community appreciated this opportunity more than others because of the hardships their fathers

¹⁶ *Ibid*

and families endured. Mantle was blessed with a chance to make it without spending his life underground mining.

The 1950 baseball season was the height for the KOM. The league was bigger than ever having being represented by eight different mining communities.¹⁷ It was also the height of teams in the KOM being sponsored by Major League teams; all but two clubs were affiliated by the big boys.¹⁸ From the looks of things at this point in the life span of the KOM It looked as if minor league baseball would forever be a part of the four state area, and more importantly the mining culture. But there was a major change in the American minor league system. “The Clouds of War were on the Horizon”.¹⁹ The United States was getting dragged into the Korean Conflict. Now instead of pursuing the baseball dreams, young men were signing up to defend their country.

In 1951 the KOM league had suffered attrition.²⁰ The league had dropped to only five teams. The attendance was still very high and people still loved their home town’s teams. But the reality was written on the walls because of insignificant numbers of players capable of playing. The KOM league survived one more summer and closed up shop in the fall of 1952.²¹ The league lasted for seven years, and offered thousands of opportunities for young kids to full fill their dreams of baseball stardom. This must have been such a sad time for the people in these mining towns who had come so used to watching minor league baseball.

¹⁷ - - - *The KOM League Remembered*, Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2004.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*

In the 1940s and 1950s life for a miner was hard way to make a living. At this point in history there were few government regulations on mine safety. Miners worked in conditions not suitable for healthy life styles. It wasn't uncommon for young men to die of lung and breathing complications because of all of suit when in the mines themselves. Disease and disability have been endemic to the American workplace. Unguarded machinery and regulated conditions produced so many accidents that muckrakers compared the hazards at work with the risks of war.²² Higher concentrations of toxic dust and new chemical poisons created serious chronic diseases for much of the industrial work force despite an improvement in health statistics for the American population as a whole.²³

This made the outlook on life very bleak for miners who dealt with death every day. Often time's miners would become very depressed because of hopeless life they lived with no end in sight in their current working conditions. With low salaries and hard economic times during the middle to late 1940s it was hard for miners and their families to get out of the four state area. Staycations would become very popular and a great break from the hassles and stresses of everyday life that mine brought to these people. There were many people that could not handle the stress of the mining profession. Often this would result in high consumption of alcohol by miners.

For strong family men who wanted to provide the best opportunities and experiences for their children and wives, these would promote going on family outings. The outings might not be anything special to an average American in today's culture. But realizing the mind frame of the

²²"The Street of Walking Death": Silicosis, Health, and Labor in the Tri-State Region, 1900-1950 Author(s): Gerald Markowitz and David Rosner Source: The Journal of American History, Vol. 77, No. 2 (Sep., 1990), pp. 525-552 Published by: Organization of American Historians Stable.

²³ *Ibid.*

miners and their families who had nearly nothing but the house they lived in and the cloths on their back. To people like this a day outing with the family wasn't something that was taken for granted. Also look at these outings from another angle, spending time with dad or an older brother who worked in the mines was time that was cherished by a family involved in the mining community at this time. The mining community just never knew when the next mine accident would happen or when the disease would take its toll on the body. When looking at family staycations from those angles people begin to realize the importance these people had on clean family fun.

Families wanting to get out of the mining mindset and culture that mine brought people would go to certain nearby places to enjoy the day. Cities like Miami, Joplin, and Bartlesville offered various amounts of fun activities that people could enjoy. Movie theaters were popular families could see their favorite actor or actress on the big screen and dream of a Hollywood lifestyle like ones portrayed in the flicks. Swimming pools also offered great recreation to beat the heat in summer months. This was a great outing in which all members on the family could enjoy the water together and bond with mom and dad. Miami offered one of the biggest drive in movie theaters in the area.²⁴ This must have been something to see when all 500 automobiles filled up the drive in parking lot.²⁵

But the role that baseball played in the four state area, especially the KOM league because of its involvement in the mining communities was unmatched by any event that these people did. The host cities of this league supported their teams religiously, cramming the ball

²⁴ Industrial Prospectus Miami, Oklahoma, Colo Research INC. Hotel Miami, Miami, Oklahoma, Prepared by The Miami Chamber of Commerce Miami, Oklahoma, September 1, 1950. The Picher Collection, Pittsburg State University Library, Archives, Pittsburg Kansas.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

parks by the thousands. Baseball at this time was the only game in town. Miners could take the whole family to the ball game buy the kids a hot dog or a box Cracker Jacks get an ice cold Coca-Cola. The anticipation that must have been building up throughout the day was amazing. The game starts at seven o'clock and all day the miners are working in such terrible conditions but they knew that once off work they could go home shower and take the family to go watch the next big star in American baseball.

Realizing that it was not just about watching good baseball or future stars like Mickey Mantle, or the Boyer brothers it was much more than that. The KOM league served as a place where miners could take their families and get away from reality. This was like a dream to them and for a short while they could have no worries, and no stress. These aspects of their life escaped their heads for those nine innings, and I bet they prayed for extra innings. This was a piece of heaven for the miners it took them back to their children's age when they had aspirations and dreams of being the next baseball star. Yes, the KOM league was much more than watching great baseball being played. This was much more than just taking the family on an outing for the night. It was much more than watching the New York Yankees new young gun playing in KOM league. Going to the Ole ball game was an escape from life for the miners, a much needed escape in this dark, and clouded world they lived in.

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