Baseball and Persistence of Community in Boston, PA

By Sean C. Madden and Timothy Kelly

For Boston and Greenock, small towns on the Youghiogheny River in Allegheny County's Elizabeth Township, baseball was one of the central elements that helped maintain the residents' sense of belonging to their community. During the first four decades of this century, baseball brought together families and friends like no other pastime or activity in town life.

Historian Rub Ruck notes that "in their prime, the sandlot teams drew more fans and meant more to people on a day-to-day basis" than did professional teams. Ruck is talking about Pittsburgh, but sandlot teams were especially important in villages such as Boston and Greenock, which of course had no professional teams. Residents who lived in the area for a significant part of the first 40 years of this century remain proud of their once thriving local traditions and the autonomy those traditions afforded their village. Baseball was one of those local traditions.

Historians are convinced that recreation played an increasingly important role in workers' lives in the years around the turn of the century, but the links between recreation and community persistence need closer attention. This article supplies that, describing ways in which baseball was woven into the community's social structure. A major goal is to demonstrate how industrial workers, principally manual laborers and miners, significantly controlled their non-work hours and shaped the effect that major societal transformations had on them. In addition, we wish to suggest that baseball had another important purpose. It enabled residents to battle, if only symbolically, the nearby cities whose rapid urban and industrial growth constantly threatened to usurp the social configurations that facilitate "community": informal relations dependent on small populations, face to face interactions, longstanding if not permanent residency, and a strong belief in traditional ways reinforced by years of relative economic and social stability. Historians know that village communities did not survive such transformations in a number of settings in America. Boston and Greenock residents certainly felt pressure by the 1920s and 1930s, when the Monongahela River Valley from McKeesport to Pittsburgh became perhaps the quintessential industrialized urban area in the world.

Boston, beside the Youghiogheny, and Greenock sit 19 miles southeast of Pittsburgh and share common town boundaries, with Greenock upstream from Boston. Exact population figures for either aren't available because the U.S. Census did not record such statistics independent of Elizabeth Township. The township's population, however, grew by 70 percent between 1900 and 1950 and 82 percent of the increase came in the last three decades of the period. About 2,000 people lived in the township in 1940.

To assess the role of baseball and of industrialization's impact on the villages, "community" must be more precisely defined. The term, after all, means many things to many people. Academics have tried for years to agree on a definition and have instead developed a multitude of conflicting explanations. Sociologists have been the academics...

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most concerned with defining community, and they define it as territorially based social organizations and social activity — "an aggregate of people who share a common interest in a particular society." For years social scientists considered a shared geographic location to be central. People needed to live near each other to maintain bonds of affection and support each other when the need arose. More recently, however, social scientists have come to consider physical proximity to be a facilitator rather than the essence of the "experiential" dimension which lies at the heart of community.

For the purposes of this paper, we have adopted Thomas Bender's definition of community as "a network of social relations marked by mutuality and emotional bonds." In this definition, those institutions which facilitate the experiential dimension of social interactions, such as churches, professional associations, and athletic leagues, transcend geographic boundaries. Formal and informal social interaction have a greater role than place of residence. This broader view of community is essential to understanding Boston and Greenock in this century.

To maintain "community," residents gathered in churches, at work and in countless informal ways. Baseball, however, was unique in that community in large part formed around local teams; team members and their relatives or friends, for instance, often traveled together to out-of-town games. In the same way, the team served to unify those who worshipped, toiled, and interacted in smaller and distinct units. Residents of the Boston area who might not otherwise interact came together throughout to root on the local teams, most notably the Boston Independents or the Greenock Red Sox. The sport was an important element of community life in many nearby towns. Blythedale, Buena Vista, Buenola, Port Vue, Victory, Industry, Duquesne, and McKeesport all fielded opponents for Boston and Greenock. Baseball games allowed residents to foster relation-

ships in ways not possible through the villages' other institutional arrangements.

The early residents of Boston and Greenock primarily were of German extraction. Although the U.S. Census Bureau did not aggregate data for incorporated areas with fewer than 10,000 residents between 1900 and 1940, the manuscripts upon which aggregated data would have been based substantiate residents' memories of a prevailing German ethnicity. While Elizabeth Township primarily was home to English, German, Irish, and Slovak people by 1910, the 6th precinct, which covers Boston and Greenock, was nearly 80 percent German. Despite the heavy German influence, the villages never developed ethnic German voluntary associations.

Most early residents were also Protestant. The two villages contained four churches through the 1940s, each of which began in the nineteenth century. Peace Lutheran Church in Greenock came to be when Trinity Church and St. Paul's Church merged in 1892. Surnames on early twentieth century confirmation lists and membership rolls suggest the congregation was almost totally German. After World War I, however, the names take on a mixed German and Scots-Irish flavor. Although people from a number of white ethnic groups lived in the area by the 1930s, it becomes clear that baseball transcended the distinctions to unite them. (The Boston team represented a largely homogeneous area, with only 7.6 percent of the township's population black in 1930. Most blacks lived six miles from Boston in Blythedale.) Peace Lutheran supported one society, the Ladies Aid, and four bible classes in its first year of existence. By 1934 the communicants held annual Women's and Men's Organization nights as well as "Community Night." Confirmation lists never contained more than a handful of people.

Fifty-seven people founded the Greenock Methodist Church in 1866, and its membership remained roughly the same size throughout the first four decades of the twentieth century. The congregation never attracted a pastor who ministered solely to their congregation until 1954, and so was unable to hold regular weekly services. Until that year the congregation shared a minister with usually three other congregations, and never had the same minister for more than three years. As late as 1932 only 29 of the 64 members remained active, though the numbers would increase dramatically after World War II, especially after a full-time minister was hired.

The Boston Methodist Church began in 1847 but did not have its own building until 1881. The congregation sold the building in the early 1930s.
to Allegheny County for construction of the Boston Bridge. The congregation built a new and larger church in 1931.  

The Boston United Presbyterian Church was founded in 1866, though its members did not construct a building solely for church purposes until 1885. Members attended services in the same building throughout the first half of the twentieth century.  

Although the distinct churches clearly divided the population by denomination, they served social roles that allowed them to reach a larger population. This effort to embrace non-communicants resulted in sporadic and informal affiliation with the local baseball teams. The Boston Methodist church served as the earliest meeting places for the Boston Blues, the first organized team in the villages. Many Greenock Red Sox players attended Peace Lutheran Church, which regularly sponsored picnics for the team and its opponents. The church also sponsored dances, dinners, and carnivals to raise money for the team, whose members accepted the church’s facilities and sponsorship but ran the events themselves.  

One resident, William Pigozzi, remembers the largest community events were annual functions organized jointly by the Red Sox and the Peace Lutheran Church.  

Boston and Greenock residents worked in local trades or occasionally outside the village. But it was mining that dominated the early employment picture, in large part because underneath much of Elizabeth Township lay one of the richest coal deposits in the United States. These deposits remained viable well into the twentieth century, with Boston and Greenock atop the Pittsburgh seam of the Monongahela Formation. The largest (and earliest) mine in the area was W.H. Brown and Sons, which began production in 1865. The coal firm of Duncan, Cornell and Werling also began operation in the nineteenth century. Another early major employer was the Boston Brick Yard, which opened in 1865 and employed 40 men at its height.  

The Peckman family offered employment opportunities, opening a slaughterhouse in the 1870s and expanding it to include a butcher shop and dry goods store by World War I. A string of smaller mines within the village’s legal boundaries, such as Eagles Nest and Osceola, employed significant numbers of local residents. A number of mines outside the villages, in the rest of the township and across the Youghiogheny River in Versailles, were also key employers, according to the 1910 census.  

Nearly 75 percent of responding employed males listed their occupations as coal workers or iron workers. During good years, these mines operated 24 hours a day, seven days a week, which forced the teams to schedule games when most players worked the convenient shift.  

In the 1920s more residents went to work in the steel mills in McKeesport, six miles away, than in the mines. U.S. Steel’s National Tube Works drew the most workers. Residents described National Tube only as “where I worked,” but as Willis Kirkland recalled, “I suppose it’s always nice to be from somewhere, even if you work somewhere else. I’m from Boston.”  

Not surprisingly, the composition of teams often reflected the town at large. The Greenock Red Sox 1926-27 roster:  

Nino Talavini ................. bus driver  
Clyde Ransick .................. car salesman  
Eugene Peckman ............. school teacher  
Nelson Ransick ............. National Tube  
Barley Hoffman ............. National Tube  
Ted Wunder .................. coal miner  
Bill Wunder .................. coal miner  
Willard “Red” Schaefer ... First Sterling Steel  
Huey Baldice ................ National Tube  
George Oberdick ........... coal miner  
Verle Oberdick ............ National Tube  

Although work was important to Boston and Greenock residents, they spent a good portion of their days and nights in leisure pursuits. They exercised a great deal of control over their activities in these periods, so leisure is really a better measure of a people’s own values than work. In addition, an examination of individual games suggests that Boston often structured its social relations, in part, with the goal of maintaining an independent and autonomous identity for the village. This goal, however, probably was not perceived or understood as such by the local residents. None of the residents who contributed oral histories for this study commented directly on this point, but we suggest that Boston and Greenock residents gathered to affirm their community in the face of perceived threats to the villages’ survival. One of the com-
community's central values became survival as a community distinct from the larger metropolises which came to dominate the region.

The baseball tradition stretched back to the nineteenth century in this area along the Yough. The first team to formally organize did so in the 1890s, though informal play had gone on earlier. Robert C. Painten supervised the organization of the Boston Blues, then served as the team's first manager. Residents quickly dubbed the team "champions," though they seem to have won no official championship. The Boston Blues became Boston Up The Yough in the early twentieth century, and residents recall they played excellent ball.

The teams had no regular schedule but rather issued "challenges" in local newspapers to other teams to play the home team. The villages often combined these challenges - the games themselves being fairly formal events - with church or other informal village-wide picnics. Although often overlooked as a social phenomenon, sporting events had the effect of uniting townspeople in a common cause: to beat other teams which represented other towns. (This impulse is also evident today, of course, in the way people often view professional sports franchises in their city as representing them against other cities.)

The Boston team grew in popularity and support despite efforts nationally to curb the spread of organized sports. Health reformers and social critics worried that a sport which required so many participants would cause men to neglect their families and careers. The Boston players got around this concern by building their family activities around the game. In fact, some observers have concluded that baseball did not disrupt the family but rather reinforced it. By 1905 Boston Up The Yough became the Boston A.C. The "Roster of Championship Teams" at the local sports Hall of Fame in Elizabeth Township includes the A.C. By 1905 the Boston A.C. gained a local rival. The Red Sox formed in Greenock when the McKeesport Daily News ran a call for players. The Red Sox and the Boston A.C. quickly became each other's main opponent, and reserved prime holidays for their games. Local residents still played other teams from neighboring areas, but they reserved the special days for residents only.

The Red Sox retained their name until their demise in the 1950s, but the Boston A.C. became the Independents in 1915, and then Boston Baton Coal in 1940. Baton Coal became Racks A.A. shortly thereafter because local tavern owner Luke Rack bought the team uniforms. Throughout the team name changes and the formation of the second area team, local residents structured a good part of their gradually increasing leisure time around the game. This emphasis on the game encouraged local boys to become good at baseball so that they could become a part of the formal event around which so much of the community revolved, and thereby raised the caliber of the local teams' play. By the 1920s and 1930s the area could boast of a number of star athletes.

Frank Korbar topped them all. He also exemplified the centrality baseball played in community formation. Born in Boston in 1914, he remembered playing ball as a youngster on any piece of field or patch of ground large enough to accommodate some sort of a game.

There was no organized baseball when I was growing up. We didn't need it. A bunch of us just used to get together with a ball, a bat, and gloves if we had them, and just belt the ball around. That's where we got tough. We played in the sandlots when we were young, then we played for the local team. Some of us played other places, but Boston was always my home.

Korbar began playing for the Boston Independents at age 16. The following year he began working at the Baton Coal mine just across the Youghiogheny River from Boston in Versailles. Versatile, Korbar could pitch, catch or play second base. He was good enough to receive offers from the Pittsburgh Pirates' farm team, the Little Orphans, which played in McKeesport. He also received offers, or what were called "first opportunity" tryouts, with the St. Louis Browns and the Cincinnati Reds. A first opportunity tryout gave a major league club a look at a player for further evaluation in the minor league system.

Though no club ever offered Korbar more than $95 monthly, this far exceeded anything he made.
in the mines. But it also meant making a break from his community — his family, his steady job, and the local team. He stayed, he said, because his father, a widower, was “having trouble” supporting the family. He stayed to help his family survive economically."

But Korbar was able to pass up the opportunity his remarkable skills presented him in part because the local team was good enough to complement Korbar on the field. Korbar said another Independent player, “Shoes” Carson, was better than he: “Carson ... could have pitched on any major league team, man, he was that good!”

But the major reason Korbar chose to pass up a possible major league career was the central place baseball played in Boston community formation, and the support Korbar received from his fellow residents because of his value to the team.

The field was, in a sense, a “cathedral” for the community. Moreover, the Independents played some other big games there, such as games against the Duquesne Zems, which sometimes drew as many as 5,000 people. The field was located near the first area crossing for the Youghiogheny River (“Elrod’s Crossing”) and the succession of Boston bridges, and it was readily accessible to people from around the township and vicinity.

William Pigozzi, a local physician and lifelong resident of the Boston area who never played on any teams, recalled that no event in the community generated more interest than when the local ball clubs played.

There was no reason to leave the community. The enthusiasm, the enthusiasm. You couldn’t believe how involved those people got. Old man Schafer would lose a dozen straw hats a year when his sons pitched in the games.... Everybody came, wives, mothers, girlfriends and co-workers. It was the best entertainment, a place to meet people, and most of us grew up in the area.

Local street builder Al Rojohn organized rallies annually that started in Greenock or Boston, depending on the location of that year’s big games, and involved hundreds of community members. Trucks and wagons pulled by tractors gathered people along the route to the game until they filled to capacity and then spilled over. Fans remember travelling great distances to see the teams play away games.

We would pack up all the kids and all of us, friends and neighbors, would either ride in a truck or walk to every game. It was our team playing. We couldn’t wait to get ready to go. Me and Johnny Castine and Fay Bigleman collected money, sold tickets and did all sorts of things to raise money for the teams.

Local residents recall attending the games in large numbers to share in the community formation and sustenance. Jacqueline Burland remembered “going to games to see neighbors, friends, and relatives. We always watched the games, but we socialized just as much. And a lot of people went even if they didn’t know many players.”

Residents supported annual fundraising dances, bingos, dinners and the very popular “Around the World Festival,” in which community members prepared ethnic dishes for their friends and neighbors to sample. The teams sometimes advertised in the McKeesport Daily News for the larger events.

The off-season fundraisers continued the socializing patterns established during the spring and summer, allowed teams to raise money, to show off the occasional new uniforms and to recruit new players...
for the upcoming season.

Baseball clearly was part of a community ritual performed hundreds of times over several decades, on a field where residents staged many of their community activities, and before a crowd of local residents often descended from others who had done the same.

2 Roy Rosenzweig, Eight Hours For What We Will: Workers and Leisure in an Industrial City, 1870-1920 (New York: 1983), 2, 5.
3 Historians have explicated such transformations in a variety of contexts. Gary Nash saw this happening in revolutionary Boston in a period of economic stress during the transition to capitalism. He chronicled the dissolution of a sense of commonwealth in Boston during this transformation from a “moral economy” to a “market economy.” The Urban Crucible: Social Change, Political Consciousness, and the Origins of the American Revolution (Cambridge: 1979). David P. Szatmary also saw this encroachment of the “market” forces in the villages of western Massachusetts and its tremendous impact on traditional social configurations in his Shays’ Rebellion: The Making of an Agrarian Insurrection (Amherst: 1980). Paul Boyer addresses the transformation which people underwent when they moved from the village to the city in the nineteenth century and chronicles some of their failed attempts to recreate the village social relations in the urban context. Urban Masses and Moral Order in America, 1820-1920 (Cambridge: 1978), chapters 1-4. We address the issue of what happens when the urban/industrial setting threatens to swallow, physically and economically, an existing village.
4 Raymond A. Mohl considers Pittsburgh to be “perhaps the ultimate industrial city” of the late nineteenth century. The New City: Urban America in the Industrial Age, 1860-1920 (Arlington Heights, Ill.: 1985). 3. Roy Lubove noted that as a result of its industrial hearths, “few communities were so frequently compared to hell” as Pittsburgh. Twentieth Century Pittsburgh: Government, Business, and Environmental Change (New York: 1969), 1. Paul Kellogg accepted an invitation to study Pittsburgh as representative of the impact of urbanization and industrialization on America in 1910, and Margaret Byington focused on Homestead in her analysis of the impact on families. Margaret F. Byington, Homestead: The Households of a Mill Town (New York: 1910). Finally, McKeepos was home to the world’s largest pipe mill in 1922, when United States Steel’s National Tube Works celebrated its 50th anniversary.

In 1860, Pittsburgh’s population was 49,221; by 1920, it was 588,343 (from 17th to ninth in population). Another 100,000 residents came during the next three decades, with most of that growth before 1930. The population began spreading out, transforming many farming communities and villages in the county into industrial suburbs, although this was not the case in the larger Mon Valley towns, which were industrial boom towns at about the same time as Pittsburgh.

6 George A. Hillery, “Definitions of Community: Areas of Agreement,” Rural Society (20 June 1955): 111-123. Hillery surveyed others’ attempts to define community and collected no fewer than 94 definitions employing 16 concepts. He further found that no two definers agreed upon all 16 concepts. Hillery did abstract a shared list of features including self-sufficiency, common life, homogeneity, shared ends and means, institutions, localism and group uniqueness.
7 Thomas Bender, Community and Social Change in America (Baltimore: 1978), 5.
9 Bender, 7. He elaborates on and develops his definition over six full pages, reflecting the difficulty he expected others would have in accepting his definition. Nevertheless, it stands as the best definition yet developed for examining changes in community over time.
11 This may be because Boston and Greenock residents never experienced the threat to their German culture which a more ethnically mixed environment may have represented.
12 For a short while, Greenock supported a Mormon Church. It was founded in 1862 but burned down in 1871. No new church took its place, though the Mormon Church retains property rights and holds services on the grounds a few times each decade. The congregation does not affiliate with the Utah-based church, however. Brother Alexander Cherry, “The Birthplace of the Church” pamphlet; “Greenock Mormon Church” file, Elizabeth Township Historical Society, Boston, Pa. (hereinafter to be cited EThS).
15 Membership has exceeded 400 in every church census since 1958. “The Greenock Methodist Church” pamphlet, “Greenock Methodist Church 1966” file, EThS.
16 Interview with Ronald Morgenstern, Boston, Pa., January 1988.
17 Joan Stefanko and Norma Werner, eds., Between Two Rivers (Boston: 1976), 103.
18 Interview with Leona Morgenstern, Boston, Pa.; The McKeepos Daily News often carried notices of such impending events.
20 Stefanko and Werner, 88. The Youghiogheny Fork, Boston’s location on the river, contained 58,000 acres of coal, which constituted 290,000,000 tons of coal capable of
being mined.

21 Stefanko and Werner, 44; “Boston Brick Yard Has Long Record” clipping, “Brick Yard (Boston)” file, ETHS.

22 “Item # 10,” “Tour Documents, Elizabeth Township Bicentennial Committee,” ETHS. The Peckmans carried a complete line of dry goods and had the largest stock between McKeesport and Sutersville (nine miles upstream).

23 Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Manuscripts of the Thirteenth Census for Allegheny County, Elizabeth Township, 1910. The estimate for the Boston and Greenock total population based upon the 6th precinct data is 1,150 for this year. The precinct does not coincide exactly with the boundaries of Boston and Greenock.

24 Interview with Willis Kirkland, Boston, Pa., January 1988.  

25 Pigozzi interview, Greenock, Pa., January 1988. Pigozzi generated much of his recollection for this lineup from his scrapbook, which he keeps at his home.

26 These gatherings are documented in the “Community News” section of the McKeesport Daily News, and included dances, dinners, and picnics.


28 Interview with Michael Castine, Boston, Pa., March 1988.

29 The major newspaper for the area was the McKeesport Daily News, but residents posted notices in church newsletters or businesses to arrange games also.

30 Harvey Green, Fit For America: Health, Fitness, Sport and American Society (New York: 1986), 208-212.

31 A.C. normally stands for Athletic Club, but neither records of the team nor residents, in their recollections, refer to the team as the Boston Athletic Club.

32 “Call For Players,” McKeesport Daily News (23 May 1905).

33 Although the last two names reflected the team’s financial sponsorship, these sponsors played no greater role than to purchase uniforms. The patterns of play and organization remained otherwise unchanged throughout the first half of the century.

34 Interview with Frank Korbar, Boston, Pa., March 1985.

35 Ibid.

36 Other residents recall that Korbar’s wife did not favor his leaving for the “big leagues.”

37 Korbar interview, Boston, Pa., March 1985.

38 Ibid.

39 Donkey Baseball is played while riding a donkey. The village used such games to raise funds. Pigozzi interview, Greenock, Pa., February 1988.

40 The Duquesne Zemps were a white amateur team that barnstormed somewhat. Korbar interview, Boston, Pa., March 1985. A crowd this large would necessarily spill out onto the nearby bridge and along the riverbanks on the other side. The McKeesport Daily News estimated the crowd sizes at a somewhat lower 1,000-1,500, which still probably exceeded the size of the entire Boston population.


43 One such ad read as follows: “Morini Hall will be the scene this evening at 9 o’clock of the tenth in a series of round and square dances sponsored by the Greenock Red Sox baseball club. Music will be furnished by the Oriole Club Orchestra and ‘Red’ Sisley will call the square dance figures.” McKeesport Daily News (1 June 1934).