BUILDING A BOX SCORE

In the years before radio broadcasting, the demand for baseball news often produced creative methods of reportage. Here hundreds gather in front of the City-County Building on Grant Street in downtown Pittsburgh to follow events of a 1919 World Series game from Cincinnati. This photograph is made all the more interesting because the series became famous for the eight Chicago White Sox players — dubbed the “Black Sox” — banned from baseball for allegedly conspiring with well-known gamblers to “fix” the series.

What is believed to be the earliest account of a baseball game’s broadcast over radio waves occurred some two years later. A reporter telephoned details of the August 5, 1921, Philadelphia Phillies-Pittsburgh Pirates contest from Forbes Field to the KDKA studio in Pittsburgh. Announcer Harold Arlin then described the action — an 8-5 Pirate win — to a new audience of listeners.

But how would such information have been communicated in the pre-Arlin years? According to a researcher at the National Baseball Library in Cooperstown, N.Y., the most likely answer is that reports were telegraphed at regular intervals from the park, creating a delay of a few minutes. But neither the city Bureau of Recreation employee bellowing through a megaphone or the other fellow chalking up balls, strikes, put-outs, etc., appears to be wired. It’s possible that a ticker machine, similar to those associated with Wall Street reporting, was employed, though it isn’t visible.

A variation of this service was common by as early as 1909, according to Ohio University history professor and baseball historian Charles Alexander. Ordinarily, a newspaper, even in a small town, contracted with Western Union, says Alexander, and sports reporters would announce the game details outside the paper’s offices after receiving hundreds of telegrams throughout the day.

It seems likely that the men shown in this photo are engaged in a sort of sidewalk theater. Knowing the bare essentials transmitted electronically — who was batting, whether a pitch was a ball or a strike, the outcome of a batted ball — they could embellish the facts, thereby creating the game’s play-by-play accounts. Remember: no moving film images or audio recordings existed to contradict an imaginative mind’s account of the game. — Text by Pittsburgh History staff volunteer Phillip Daquila. Photograph courtesy of the Archives of Industrial Society, University of Pittsburgh Hillman Library.