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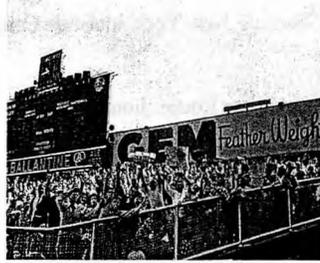
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IV

American Immigration and Baseball:

A Parallel Pastime

By Katy Missimer '06



As scholar Gerald Early predicts, “I think there are only three things America will be known for 2,000 years from now when they study this civilization: the Constitution, jazz music, and baseball.” Baseball is truly ingrained in the American culture as more than a pastime. As historians and scholars now speculate, baseball is a metaphor of the American way of life. An individual offensive game, a batter fights for his own success with a hit, while a team defensive effort of nine individuals in the field back up the pitcher. A true combination of individual and team effort, baseball epitomizes the American Dream. It is no coincidence that the goal of each runner is to reach home plate; America is home. This concept has become the topic of extensive research and investigation to determine why baseball has been so successful in America. As historians point out, America is a land of immigrants. Immigrants are attracted to a game that allows them to play for themselves, as in preserving their own culture, yet in the company of other immigrants all playing for the team, in this case the American nation. In this sense, America’s national pastime, baseball, presents an undeniable visualization of the determination and tireless journey shared by America’s immigrants to reach their own version of the American Dream.

The first parallels can be drawn through the game itself. The entire design of baseball, its rules and regulations, make it attractive to the American immigrant. “Baseball seems to embody many of the values coming to dominate an urbanized and industrialized America. A number of scholars have suggested that baseball may be perceived as a sort of mirror in which values, power, politics, fashion, class, economics, and race may be viewed in microcosm.”¹ Baseball is held as a physical representation of the American melting pot: a prominent display of cultural pluralism. Baseball is an elaboration of Horace M. Kallen’s philosophy—Kallen stressed the need to recognize and foster the ethnic culture of immigrants. He advocated the United States as a “federation of distinct nationalities” preserving the “emotionality and involuntary life” of each

¹ Ronald Briley, “Baseball and American Cultural Values,” (*OAH Magazine of History*, 7, 1992), 1.

ethnicity.² This “federation” can be viewed as the National League in Major League Baseball. The National League is made up of teams from Boston to Tampa, a league made up of individual teams fighting for one spot to play against the American League in the World Series. Though each individual team wants to win, just as each immigrant wants to succeed, come October, all players in the National League are in support of one of their own, just as immigrants support each other. As an image, baseball is a continuation and extension of the now somewhat primitive melting pot analogy. “The melting pot theory has fallen out of favor with many. Its suggestion of a cauldron in which ethnic differences are fused into a homogenous amalgam does not sit well in a postmodern culture.”³ Baseball has replaced the melting pot as the true visualization of American immigration. “There is no question that baseball, more than any other sport and more than most American social institutions, has mirrored the gradual and often difficult process of assimilation experienced by a succession of ethnic and racial groups.”⁴

This concept of baseball as a visual reflection of the American culture is shared by various historians. As author Steven A. Riess proposes in his 1980 work, baseball served two functions in American society: “it would teach children traditional American values and that it would help newcomers assimilate into the dominant WASP culture through their participation in the sport’s rituals.”⁵ As stressed in class, the striving American culture rested on a new set of values immigrants died to instill in their children. Assimilation became the key goal for various immigrant groups as the American culture developed, pushing Kallen’s “dual nationalism” into the recent past. Immigrants like Joe DiMaggio and Stan “The Man” Musial excelled at a game indigenous to a country where they could not even speak the language. “Al Simmons, Joe DiMaggio, and Hank Greenberg became national heroes whose popularity transcended their ethnic group.”⁶ Immigrant ballplayers gained fame and fortune through their willingness and readiness to assimilate. “Ironically, as immigrants ascended to unparalleled prominence in baseball, their personal and public ethnic identity began to diminish.”⁷ Immigrant baseball players were becoming American baseball players.

Assimilation offered American immigrants the opportunities to achieve their own American Dream. An investigation into cultural theory reveals that the sooner immigrants are assimilated whether through language or pastimes like baseball, the sooner they can begin attaining a new, individual identity for themselves. In other words, in order to become truly independent, immigrants must accept their new identities as members of a larger whole, Americans. “The point is that cultural change is multidirectional, a product of interactions, sometimes engaged in voluntarily and sometimes involuntarily.”⁸ Cultural change was the pull for most American immigrants,

² Philip Gleason, *Speaking of Diversity: Language and Ethnicity in Twentieth Century America*, (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 3.

³ Lawrence Baldassaro and Richard A. Johnson, *The American Game: Baseball and Ethnicity*, (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2000), 4.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Steven A. Riess, *Touching Base: Professional Baseball and American Culture in the Progressive Era*, (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1980), 7.

⁶ John P. Rossi, *The National Game: Baseball and American Culture*, (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2000), 214.

⁷ Baldassaro, 45.

⁸ Ibid., 178.

democracy at the forefront. American democracy offered immigrants an identity in national politics that many had lacked in Europe. The right to vote was a treasured American value, and in turn baseball also echoes this desire for democracy. As historian Robert Elias observes:

Baseball is democracy in action: in it all men are “free and equal,” regardless of race, nationality, or creed. Every man is given the rightful opportunity to rise to the top on his own merits...it is the fullest expression of freedom of speech, freedom of press, and freedom of assembly in our national life.⁹

On the baseball diamond, ethnicity meant nothing. All players were considered equal, despite their homeland. “One of the most appealing aspects of the new game for the working classes was the simplicity of the equipment required—just a bat and ball, and a space to play in.”¹⁰ Even the poorest of the arriving immigrants could participate in the American game. A game without class or ethnic barriers appealed to the newest of arrivals because baseball represented the one thing America had that no one else could master: freedom, the freedom to play, the freedom to watch, the freedom to support.

The need to depend upon members of a different race was crucial to assimilating vast groups of immigrants. Despite nationality, religion, or language, all immigrants were still immigrants in a foreign land fighting for survival. “North Americans had promoted the baseball as an illustration of democracy and opportunity. But the ‘Great Colossus to the North’ could also be a land of broken promise.”¹¹ There was still ethnic and cultural prejudice and discrimination flourishing in America. Even the successful ballplayers had something to prove. “The professionals were perceived as mainly lower-class Irishmen even though they were previously mainly tradesmen or low level white-collar workers.”¹² The ability of immigrants to adopt the American ways of language and culture was the key to their survival and success. A Spanish-speaking catcher cannot hope to encourage his German-speaking pitcher without the two compromising on a common language: English. This method of compromise became ingrained in the assimilation process as a necessity to achieve the American Dream. “By believing in the American Dream, immigrants actually have achieved a higher standard of living. In the country they came from, their new level of material wealth would have been considered gluttonous. In America, it’s merely middle class.”¹³ The American Dream was not simply handed to immigrants, baseball only eased national tensions.

The American Dream represents different things for different immigrants: democracy, a flourishing economy, an individual identity, a home. “It is an ironic coincidence that in September 1845, in the very month that the Knickerbockers (America’s first team) organized to play their new game, the first wave of the blight that would destroy the potatoes drifted over the Irish countryside.”¹⁴ Immigration and baseball grew up in America together. “With the great European migration to America of the latter nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Anglo-American dominance of the game on the ball field rapidly diminished.”¹⁵ It is really second generation American

⁹ Robert Elias, *Baseball and the American Dream*, (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 2001), 10.

¹⁰ Rossi, 6.

¹¹ Baldassaro, 163.

¹² Reiss, 155.

¹³ Elias, 194.

¹⁴ Baldassaro, 7.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

immigrants that were able to realize the value in baseball. Assimilation was most important for the children of first generation immigrants because they wanted to establish themselves no longer as a group of immigrants, but as American citizens. The easy answer to this quest was baseball. "Baseball provided one avenue of entry to mainstream society, either as fans or as participants...at a time when baseball was already well established as the national pastime, and when journalists and social workers were touting the game as a means of acculturating the new immigrants to American values."¹⁶ Even as fans, immigrants were actively taking part in a truly American entity, openly supporting, participating in their national pastime.

The baseball game was also appealing because of its appreciation of the immigrant-preservation of the family unit. As a family, immigrants could come out and watch their local team play and join the family of fans. The fans represented a larger family of neighbors, all supporting their representatives on the field. "Baseball's ideology still asserted that spectators came from all walks of life and all social origins."¹⁷ A diverse fan base not only filled the stands, but strengthened the community. When one element, in this case baseball, had the power to cross the lines of societal class, a natural phenomenon was born: a national pastime. As immigrants from different parts of the world (mainly Southern and Eastern Europe) started to arrive, baseball appealed most to those immigrants, to those seeking any way to "Americanize" themselves. "For professional baseball, the new immigrants meant potential new customers. One way to tap into this market was to put ethnic heroes on the field."¹⁸ The new wave of immigrants was drawn to the success their fellow countrymen were having playing a simple game. This appeal led more and more immigrants to arrive, looking for a piece of the "game," a piece of the national pastime.

National pastimes do not just magically appear and gain a mass following. "The key to baseball's appeal, therefore, rests not in the false nostalgia of the twentieth century, but in the culture of the United States in the years immediately preceding the Civil War."¹⁹ The American post-war culture fed into the development and support of baseball because of its reunion. The split leagues, American and National, stem from the once divided North and South. After Civil War, national pride is always a key issue. With a divided public, America needed some uniting force to bring its two extremes together as one. "Baseball after the Civil War, like the nation, was ready to take off."²⁰ Baseball was the answer. "Baseball became a symbol of reunification...the baseball fraternity should prove to the world that sectionalism is unknown in our national game."²¹ It is this strength, security, and unity that drew immigrants to America's national game. Baseball grew as more and more immigrants realized the values and benefits available on the diamond and in the stands. "The game, with its rich traditions and history of baseball heroes, provided a sense of continuity and stability in a rapidly changing and uncertain society. No other sport seemed to catch the essence of the nation's character as baseball did."²² The American character was another of the attractions for immigrants—coupled

¹⁶ Ibid., 93.

¹⁷ Reiss, 35.

¹⁸ Baldassaro, 1.

¹⁹ Jules Tygiel, *Past Time: Baseball as History*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 5.

²⁰ Rossi, 12.

²¹ Tygiel, 13-14.

²² Elias, 187.

with American values, character represented a true American. The true American character was the element that most shaped the evolution of baseball as a national pastime.

Baseball did not grow in America because it was entertaining or fun to play. Baseball grew in America because it was American. American values and beliefs are ingrained in the dugout dirt. Baseball has replaced the outdated melting pot analogy and has become the visual representation of America as a nation and culture. "The game finally became the democratic spectator sport its ideology had long proclaimed it to be...Participation in the rituals of baseball promoted social integration and celebrated values of small town society in an urban age."²³ All aspects of the American way of life from values and beliefs to dreams and goals are exhibited by our national pastime. Baseball is not just a game; baseball is the American way of life.

²³ Reiss, 233.

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