

Fields of Engagement Baseball in Rural Ontario, 1870-1925

Ben Robinson

Volume 102, numéro 1, spring 2010

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1065596ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1065596ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

The Ontario Historical Society

ISSN

0030-2953 (imprimé)

2371-4654 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Robinson, B. (2010). Fields of Engagement: Baseball in Rural Ontario, 1870-1925. *Ontario History*, 102(1), 40-55. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1065596ar>

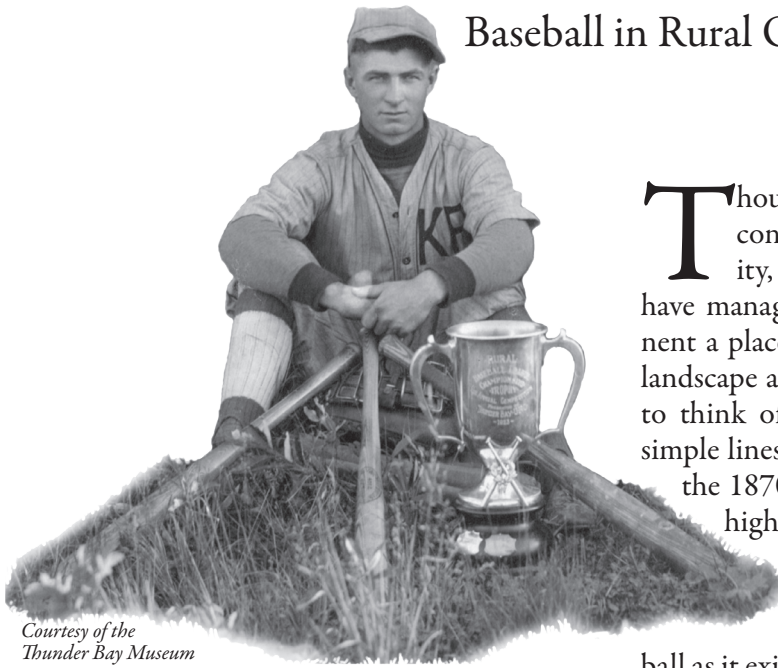
Résumé de l'article

La place du baseball dans l'histoire de l'Ontario, particulièrement dans les zones rurales, a été négligée ou sous-estimée, et cela en faveur d'autres sports de loisir plus typiquement canadiens comme le hockey ou le jeu de lacrosse. Mais dans les zones rurales, les Ontariens ont depuis longtemps pratiqué le baseball, et cela pour plusieurs raisons. Leur pratique de ce sport, leur manière de se l'approprier, en acceptant ou rejetant différents éléments, peut nous aider à définir, l'organisation, la structure communautaire, et l'identité dans l'Ontario rural.

FIELDS OF ENGAGEMENT

Baseball in Rural Ontario, 1870-1925

by Ben Robinson



Courtesy of the
Thunder Bay Museum

Though soccer and basketball continue to grow in popularity, few recreational pursuits have managed to carve out as permanent a place in the Canadian sporting landscape as baseball. Though we tend to think of the sport along pastoral, simple lines, baseball has, since at least the 1870s, been a widely regulated, highly organized sport with strong urban associations. This phenomenon has effectively positioned baseball as it existed in rural areas in a blind

spot. Despite the urbanized phenomenon of organized sport and the related facets of professionalism and commercialization, baseball has been popular in rural Ontario. Indeed, baseball in the province's rural areas has long served as a unifying force capable of maintaining community structure in the face of declining rural population and

Abstract

Baseball's place in Ontario history, especially in rural areas, has been undervalued and overlooked in favor of other, more visibly Canadian pastimes such as hockey and lacrosse. But rural Ontarians have long played baseball and for a number of reasons. Their participation in baseball, through the appropriation, acceptance, and rejection of various elements of the sport, helps us define order, community structure, and identity in rural Ontario.

Résumé: *La place du baseball dans l'histoire de l'Ontario, particulièrement dans les zones rurales, a été négligée ou sous-estimée, et cela en faveur d'autres sports de loisir plus typiquement canadiens comme le hockey ou le jeu de lacrosse. Mais dans les zones rurales, les Ontariens ont depuis longtemps pratiqué le baseball, et cela pour plusieurs raisons. Leur pratique de ce sport, leur manière de se l'approprier, en acceptant ou rejetant différents éléments, peut nous aider à définir, l'organisation, la structure communautaire, et l'identité dans l'Ontario rural.*

continued urban industrial growth. It is the intention of this paper to show that rural Ontarians' participation in baseball, through the appropriation, acceptance, and rejection of the sport's elements, represented an interest in defining and, pivotally, maintaining modes of rural order, community structure, and identity.¹

Since 1888, when journalist Jacob Morse and entrepreneur Thomas W. Lawson published *Sphere and Ash: History of Baseball* and *The Krank: His Language and What it Means* respectively, baseball has proven to be an enormously popular subject for historical inquiry. Not surprisingly, most scholarship has been American in origin. Early twentieth century histories by National League figurehead Albert Spalding, black player and club owner Sol White, and others² stressed baseball's embodiment of American character, and the game's

iconographic moments and players, to perpetuate baseball's place in a crowded commercial environment. This "hagiographic" and understandably popular approach to baseball history, which celebrated the game's myths and symbols,³ continued until the 1960s when cultural history gained prominence.⁴ Harold Seymour's *Baseball: The Early Years* (1960), its subsequent volumes, and the work of fellow baseball historian David Q. Voigt⁵ began to examine baseball's past from an increasingly academic perspective that considered the sport in relation to American society's larger social, economic, and political issues. Since the 1960s both professional and nonprofessional historians have contributed to a deeper, more comprehensive understanding of baseball's past through numerous modes of interpretation including statistical analysis, oral history, historical narrative, and

¹ Regarding the sources and methodology used in this article, my original intention to analyze how baseball was modified and reshaped in the Canadian countryside yielded little evidence. However, as I continued to collect examples of baseball's utility in rural Ontario certain themes began to emerge, such as community pride and the difficulties of negotiating busy schedules, that, by suggesting how and why baseball was played in the countryside, began to provide a framework for analysis. Edwinna von Baeyer's *Ontario Rural Society 1867-1930: A Thematic Index of Selected Ontario Agricultural Periodicals* was crucial in this process. Canadiana, a web-based digital archive of Canadian periodicals dating back to the late eighteenth century, as well as local history items such as Tweedsmuir histories and various items from the University of Guelph's archival collection, were also valuable.

² Aside from Spalding's *America's National Game: Historic Facts Concerning the Beginning, Evolution, Development and Popularity of Base Ball* (1911; repr. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1992) and White's "Sol White's Official Base Ball Guide," In *Sol White's History of Colored Baseball, With Other Documents of the Early Black Game, 1886-1936*, compiled by Jerry Malloy (Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 1995), Alfred H. Spink's *The National Game*, 2nd Edition (1910; repr. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2000) is a good example of early twentieth-century baseball histories.

³ Paul J. Zinn, "Diamond in the Rough: Baseball and the Study of American Sports History," *The History Teacher* 19:3 (May 1986): 385-86 and 389.

⁴ One exception to the anecdotal, dugout tale-obsessed histories of the first half of the twentieth century is Robert W. Henderson's *Ball, Bat, and Bishop: The Origin of Ball Games* (New York City: Rockport Press, 1947) which deals not only with baseball but other, older folk ball games as well.

⁵ Voigt's works include a three-part history of baseball that started with *American Baseball: From Gentleman's Sport to the Commissioner System* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma, 1996).

micro-history.⁶

In Canada, the extensive work of Canadian sport historian William Humber has significantly enhanced the image of baseball in the nation's memory while historians Nancy B. Bouchier, David L. Bernard, and others have approached baseball from an increasingly academic perspective. Like Bouchier, historian Colin D. Howell and Alan Metcalfe, a professor of human kinetics, have studied baseball history, but in discussion of Canadian sport in general and mainly from an urban standpoint. Attempts by sportswriter Bob Elliot and others to document the history of baseball in Canada have been sentimental in nature and heavily focused on more modern developments and professional baseball. Certainly baseball in rural Canada has yet to attract consistent and comprehensive historical study.

Baseball in Canada matured alongside many games and recreations. In the 1840s and 1850s a generation of people began to distance themselves from their British heritage and identify themselves

more with North America. The search for a unique national identity, a movement Metcalfe has called Canadianization,⁷ included the assimilation of sports and games. Fox-hunting, ice-hockey, curling, billiards, chess, and other pursuits had all begun to take root in the years prior to Confederation, each capturing varying degrees of popularity.⁸

Baseball grew during this period as well, taking shape through the evolution of primitive British ball games played in Upper Canada and America.⁹ However, America's relentless, culturally specific ownership of the sport's iconography has, in large part, made it hard for Canadians to tap into the baseball tradition.¹⁰ Posed with this dilemma, Canada's contribution to baseball's growth has often been shrouded and the country's ability to forge an independent place in the sport's history has been lessened.¹¹ Subsequently, baseball's place in Canadian history, especially in rural areas, has been undervalued and overlooked in favor of other Canadian pastimes such as lacrosse and hockey.

⁶ In the last forty years an incredible array of important baseball histories have been published. The better ones include: Lawrence S. Ritter, *The Glory of Their Times: The Story of the Early Days of Baseball Told By the Men Who Played It* (1966: repr. New York: Quill, William Morrow, 1984); Warren Goldstein, *Playing for Keeps: A History of Early Baseball* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989); Bill James, *The New Bill James Historical Baseball Abstract* (Toronto: Free Press, 2001); Donald Dewey, *The 10th Man: The Fan in Baseball History* (New York City: Carroll & Graf Publishers, 2004).

⁷ Alan Metcalfe, *Canada Learns To Play: The Emergence of Organized Sport, 1807-1914* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1986), 30.

⁸ Nancy Howell and Maxwell Howell, *Sports and Games in Canadian Life 1700 to Present* (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1969), 19-39.

⁹ William Humber, *Diamonds of the North: A Concise History of Baseball in Canada* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1995), 16.

¹⁰ Mark Kingwell, "Colonialism, Civility and the National Team," in *All I Thought About Was Baseball*, eds. William Humber and John St. James (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), 165.

¹¹ Sean Hayes, "America's National Pastime and Canadian Nationalism," *Sport in Society* 4, no. 2 (January 2001): 168.

But Canadians did choose to play baseball and in great numbers. The game found a welcome home in the Prairie Provinces where a game of 'bat' was played at Manitoba's Red River settlement in the 1830s.¹² In the 1880s farmers in Regina formed a ball club to heighten their spirits after being ravaged by drought¹³ and an 1898 letter from a recent settler of Collestown, Saskatchewan, counted the many baseball clubs he could play with among the benefits of his new home.¹⁴ In the eastern provinces, accounts of baseball in New Brunswick date back to 1840.¹⁵ By the 1920s the Maritimes, as in British Columbia, relied heavily on cross-border contests with American teams and were influenced by the presence of American players.¹⁶ Later, during the 1930s, baseball continued to grow and softball exploded in popularity.¹⁷ In Quebec, baseball during the interwar period spread as it did elsewhere, via semi-professional league competition among Anglophones in urban areas,¹⁸

although Quebecers have oftentimes struggled with the sport's American connotations.¹⁹ Baseball even reached the Canadian north in places such as Pond Inlet arriving, among other ways, via television in the 1980s.²⁰

Baseball has long flourished in Ontario, undergoing a surge in popularity after Confederation in the Woodstock, Guelph, London, and Hamilton areas especially. According to the *1876 Canadian Baseball Guide*, the sport was "almost entirely unknown outside of these places,"²¹ a statement that reflects the considerable concentration of baseball in southern Ontario at this time. The telegraph had expanded circles of competition through the advent of sports coverage in newspapers²² and, just as importantly, marked improvements in railway connections, both in urban and rural areas, "transformed the previously agrarian pattern of games and pastimes into sports."²³ Due to considerable contact with American professional teams, organized base-

¹² Humber, *Diamonds of the North*, 19-22.

¹³ N. Howell and M. Howell, *Sports and Games in Canadian Life 1700 to Present* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1969), 83.

¹⁴ *Prosperity Follows Settlement: Settlers' Experiences in Western Canada* (Ottawa: Department of the Interior, 1900), 69.

¹⁵ Humber, *Diamonds of the North*, 19-22.

¹⁶ Lappage, "The Canadian Scene and Sport, 1921-1939," 285-86 and 231-32.

¹⁷ Ronald Lappage, "The Canadian Scene and Sport, 1921-1939," in eds. Maxwell L. Howell and Reet A. Howell (Champaign, IL: Stipes Publishing Company, 1985), 296.

¹⁸ Michel Nareau, "Identity in Quebec's Baseball Novel," *Dominionball* (2005): 109-112.

¹⁹ Christian Trudeau, "Quebec Baseball Outside of Montreal," *Dominionball* (2005): 86.

²⁰ Scott Feschuk, "Caribou Hooves and the Midnight Sun," in *All I Thought About Was Baseball*, eds. William Humber and John St. James (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), 87-89.

²¹ Bryce, *1876 Canadian Baseball Guide*, 7.

²² Roxborough, "The Beginning of Organized Sport in Canada," 34.

²³ Allan E. Cox et al., "Sport in Canada, 1868-1900," in *History of Sport in Canada*, eds. Maxwell L. Howell and Reet A. Howell (Champaign, IL: Stipes Publishing Company, 1985), 113.

ball in Ontario, most notably those cities mentioned above, underwent regional variations, achieving the standardization needed for international competition with the adoption of the New York rules, which dictated an underhand delivery and four bases among other innovations, in the late 1850s and early 1860s.²⁴

The relationship between the changing nature of rural Ontario and baseball represents a core aspect of this paper's analysis. As will be discussed later, Ontario's countryside witnessed a marked population decrease at the turn of the twentieth century as many youths made the decision to accept jobs, and lifestyles, in urban centres rather than remain on the farm. In 1913, sociologist John MacDougall believed that recreation, if adopted seriously enough to "have a true relation to real life in the country,"²⁵ could remedy the challenges facing rural Ontario. His point was echoed by contemporary Alex Maclaren, an advocate for recreation in rural Ontario, who believed that, when once fishing and hunting had satisfied rural peoples' "play instinct," team sports such as baseball needed to be promoted for the perpetuation of rural community spirit.²⁶ For Maclaren, organized sport was one of the most capable methods of

persuading youth to view rural Ontario as an attractive place to live.²⁷ The observations of both men suggest that rural Ontarians needed to be accountable for the vitality and spirit of their communities. The old rural recreations, such as corn-husking and bees, were disappearing and increasingly athletics became necessary for youth's continued interest in the countryside.²⁸ Specifically, although it was not always successful, the role baseball played for Ontarians during the province's rural to urban shift was as a unifier. Baseball, much like the work bee, helped to maintain community cohesion. As will be seen, when the sport was played in rural Ontario it served the function of bringing people together for the chance, not only to play, but also to share experiences and, subsequently, to increase rural community spirit.

In this sense, the analogous presence of urban Ontario requires discussion. Baseball in Ontario, as with other sports, was deeply affected by the advent of organized sport, an urban middle class institution²⁹ that clearly defined the form of baseball, the structure of competition, and the extent of participation.³⁰ In 1864 the Canadian Association of Base Ball Players was formed³¹ and twenty year lat-

²⁴ Humber, *Diamonds of the North*, 19.

²⁵ John MacDougall, *Rural Life in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1913), 137.

²⁶ Alex Maclaren, "Organized Play and Recreation," *Farmer's Advocate* 51, no. 1265 (December 21, 1916), 2109.

²⁷ "Encourage Clean Country Sport," *Farmer's Advocate* 49, no. 1130 (21 May 1914): 991-92.

²⁸ "Modern Diversions in Farm Life," *Farmer's Advocate* 56, no. 1493 (5 May 1921): 741-42.

²⁹ Metcalfe, *Canada Learns To Play*, 26-29

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 11.

³¹ Nancy B. Bouchier, *For the Love of the Game: Amateur Sport in Small-Town Ontario, 1838-1895* (London: McGill-Queen's University Press: 2003), 104.

er, the Amateur Athletic Association.³² The YMCA, and various church groups encouraged organized sport, offering leadership and facilities for the proliferation of baseball and other sports.³³

By the 1880s the popularity of organized urban baseball had overshadowed the game's presence in rural Ontario. In the late 1860s and early 1870s newspapers such as the *Globe and Mail* had been inclined to report on local affairs, such as an 1869 Dominion Day game between the Young Canadians and the Atlantic junior club of Woodstock,³⁴ as well as games between the Maitlands of Ainleyville and the Shoo' Flies of Wroxeter³⁵ and the Number Two Club and the Mechanics Club in Berlin (now Kitchener).³⁶ Local, isolated matters were soon supplanted by accounts of highly organized, commercial baseball. By the 1880s the major professional leagues of the time such as the National League comprised most of the *Globe and Mail's* baseball coverage, exhibiting the degree to which the game had become a highly regulated institution.

It would be false to suggest that rural Ontario was cut off from the explosion of urban organized sport. Rather, rural Ontario was a willing participant in its

growth as organized baseball showed itself quite prominently across the countryside and in small rural towns. The *Farmer's Advocate* praised baseball for "[stirring] up that sportsmanlike rivalry between towns and villages and communities."³⁷ Taking their cue from Woodstock, Guelph, and London, small towns and villages across Ontario actively began to use baseball as a means of town boosterism and as a vehicle for realizing civic pride. An 1888 account from Coldspring says that, after church and tea, "came a warmly-contested game of base-ball, in an adjoining field, in which the Coldspring boys [presumably, in this case, the most skilled young men] met and vanquished (as was meet and proper) an aspiring team from a neighbouring village."³⁸ More deliberate in its civic-mindedness was a short article that appeared in the *Guelph Herald* in 1889. Speaking on behalf of his hometown friends, the *Herald's* correspondent explained how baseball in Canada supposedly got its start in the tiny hamlet of Aberfoyle thus, he suggests, settling the matter.³⁹ As it served for larger cities, baseball was a means by which small towns and rural areas could exhibit their prosperity and enhance their image as strong and wor-

³² Colin D. Howell, *Blood, Sweat, and Cheers: Sport and the Making of Modern Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), 63.

³³ Kevin Jones, "Sports and Games From 1900 to 1920," in *History of Sport in Canada*, eds. Maxwell L. Howell and Reet A. Howell (Champaign, IL: Stipes Publishing Company, 1985), 172.

³⁴ *Globe and Mail*, 29 June 1869, 1.

³⁵ "Special Telegrams," *Globe and Mail*, 4 July 1871, 1.

³⁶ *Globe and Mail*, 1 August 1871, 1.

³⁷ "Rural Organization for Sport," *Farmer's Advocate* 57, no. 1561 (24 August 1922): 1123.

³⁸ "News of the Churches," *The Canadian Independent* 7, no. 8 (August 1888): 242.

³⁹ "More Gleanings From the Mercury Files," *Guelph Historical Society Publications* 6, no. 4 (1966), 8.

thy players in Ontario's vast landscape.

This form of engagement that rural Ontario had with baseball was far from inconsequential. From its earliest days, organized baseball had been closely linked to professionalism, the act of accepting pay for services on the ball field. This trend, exemplified by Guelph, London, and Kingston clubs by the mid-1870s,⁴⁰ challenged "the respectability and character building nature of small-town team sports."⁴¹ Rural Ontarians were keenly aware of how professionalism, though capable of enhancing a town's feeling of achievement and worth, could also erode a sense of local identity. In 1913, the *Farmer's Advocate* condemned the importation of outside, urban entertainments of all types, calling instead for the development of local talent.⁴² This problem, it seems, was a lingering one and presented itself in a converse manner as well. By the 1930s professionalism had polarized many small-town baseball fans as many skilled local players were lured to larger cities.⁴³ Though rural Ontarians played baseball on their own terms, the influence of an urban, organized baseball structure was always present.

At this point, a discussion of the culture of baseball in urban and rural Ontario is necessary. It is important to keep in mind that baseball was not *wholly* different in appearance and utility in rural

areas than it was in urban areas. Urban factory workers needed to negotiate work responsibility when incorporating baseball into their lives just as farmers had to. Debunking the rural idyll myth, which imagines that baseball is inherently pastoral, Steven M. Gelber, an historian of leisure and labor, has said that

baseball was popular because it was similar to, not because it was different from, day to day life. Baseball provided the male business worker with a leisure analog. In the game he experienced social relationships and psychological demands similar to those he knew at work."⁴⁴

Certainly urban areas such as Guelph and Hamilton, noted above, had more contact with baseball. However, for participants in both urban *and* rural Ontario, baseball was a relished activity in the times it could be played.

However, despite the sport's similarities wherever it was played and the strong influence of the organized game, baseball *did* occupy a much different space in rural areas than in urban centres. Indeed, rural life forced the game to adapt to distinct patterns.

For rural Ontarians, finding time for recreation could be difficult. Baseball, as with rural recreations in general, was often based around the seasons, work, community gatherings, holidays, bees, and rural institutions such as school and

⁴⁰ Bryce, 1876 *Canadian Baseball Guide*, 9-10.

⁴¹ Lynne Marks, *Revivals and Roller-Rinks: Religion, Leisure, and Identity in Late-Nineteenth Century Small-Town Ontario* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996): 123-24.

⁴² "Develop Local Talent," *Farmer's Advocate* 48 (13 February 1913): 253.

⁴³ N. Howell and M. Howell, *Sports and Games in Canadian Life 1700 to the Present*, 147.

⁴⁴ Steven M. Gelber, "Working at Playing: The Culture of the Workplace and the Rise of Baseball," *Journal of Social History* 16, no. 4 (Summer 1983): 7.

church. Sports Days, times designated for recreation, were something that many communities implemented.⁴⁵ Sport in rural areas, Metcalfe has stated, did not accentuate social differences as it did in cities, but was much more of a communal enterprise meant to bring people together.⁴⁶ In Clifford in the late 1890s, sports provided an opportunity for “residents of neighbouring villages and farms to meet and talk about everything from the weather to the price of grain.”⁴⁷ Though great fun and exercise, sport in Clifford was also “a stimulus for community morale” that created healthy rivalry between surrounding towns and villages.⁴⁸ Because it was often difficult for a large group of people to play baseball with any regularity, the rare moments when the game could be indulged in tended to bring the community together in recognition of scarce opportunity and served purposes both physical and social.

Even though many rural Ontarians recognized that baseball offered relief from toil, the demands of work left little time for the game. Thus the normal relationship between recreation and work was altered. Because outdoor work provided a rigorous form of exercise, rural

workers did not seek out physical activity for the same reasons as their urban counterparts.⁴⁹ This point is pivotal for understanding how rural Ontario engaged with baseball. In 1895, *Farming* stressed that if recreation was indulged in gratuitously by farmers (presumably males) then “it [would] soon become labor of the most unsatisfying and exhaustive character.”⁵⁰ Moreover, it was often difficult for the farmer to justify or enjoy time off.⁵¹ In 1918, the *Farmer's Advocate* wrote “Play and recreation are not very popular terms in these times when all are bending to the work in hand and making every moment count.”⁵² Whatever the recognized benefits of sport, baseball and other forms of leisure were secondary concerns. There was a hesitancy to embrace baseball fully because to do so would divert attention from the responsibilities of the farm, thus reconstructing defined patterns of work.

Perhaps not surprisingly then, links to work and notions of productivity were visible in the approach of rural Ontarians to baseball as engagement in the game did not necessarily constitute a complete escape from the sphere of work. After an 1888 game between ladies⁵³ from neighbouring towns, during a country picnic

⁴⁵ Barry Broadfoot, “There Was Always the Baseball,” in *All I Thought About Was Baseball*, eds. William Humber and John St. James (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), 27-28; Lappage, “The Canadian Scene and Sport, 1921-1939,” 252.

⁴⁶ Metcalfe, *Canada Learns To Play*, 219.

⁴⁷ G.M. Taylor, *Historical Sketches of Clifford 1855 to 1967*. (The Harriston Review, 1967), 109.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ “Recreation in Rural Areas,” *European Conference on Rural Life 1939* (International Labour Office: League of Nations Publications, 17, 1939), 32.

⁵⁰ “Do Farmers Need Recreation?” *Farming* 13 (September 1895), 39-40.

⁵¹ “A Half-Holiday for Farmers,” *Farmer's Advocate* 55, no. 1444 (27 May 1920), 1005.

⁵² “Play and Recreation,” *Farmer's Advocate* 53, no. 1350 (8 August 1918), 1293.

⁵³ One difficulty of analyzing baseball's utility in rural Ontario is the quantification of who exactly

in Edgar, *The Canadian Independent* reported, “the players sat down at the heavy-laden table, and once more was the old proverb fulfilled, ‘He that works must eat.’”⁵⁴ Rather than forget the responsibilities of work, when baseball was played the spirit of work was carried over and maintained, thus affording play with a measurable worth justified by productivity.

Interestingly, rural Ontarians often incorporated baseball into their lives at the expense of work. In Puslinch in the 1880s, when baseball was achieving much popularity in the area, “apart from funerals, baseball was the only thing that was allowed to interfere with farming.”⁵⁵ The participants (probably the men of the community in this case), it seems, were quite determined to play. In local

tournaments, which were quite characteristic of rural competition, “The play-offs would be held in the evenings so the players could go home to do the milking first.”⁵⁶ One man gave up his work responsibilities altogether, choosing to play baseball rather than hay.⁵⁷ Years later, in 1922, the *Farmer’s Advocate* related a similar account in regards to a league started in Brant County. The publication observed “it was not uncommon to see the binder idle, and even the threshing machine stopped, while everyone turned out to the league games on Wednesday afternoon.” Young and old enjoyed the afternoon of sport as “Hay and grain were allowed to stand in the fields.”⁵⁸ Such accounts illustrate the relative importance of baseball and, more inclusively, leisure as a manner by which the stress of rural

was playing. Discerning the level of female participation, as well as that of farmhands and children, is often an unsure exercise. Though women and children were present at holiday gatherings, how often they actually played baseball is difficult to determine. However, what can be inferred is that, because holidays and picnics were usually family events, those who played baseball on these days probably represented, to varying degrees, a mixed group of different ages, skill levels, and genders. As will be discussed later, softball, which was easier to organize and play, increased the likelihood of regular female and youth participation. Such was the case in Badenoch in the 1920s when female softball gained prominence (“Badenoch 1832-1967,” Miscellaneous Histories and Publications of Guelph and Area Churches, Schools, Companies, Events, and People, Guelph Historical Society Collection, XR1 MS A324038, Archival and Special Collections, University of Guelph Library). According to one account from Badenoch, these female participants included young girls [“Badenoch Women’s Institute,” (Tweedsmuir History, 1968), 43]. The same was true in Morriston whose girl’s team often played against Badenoch [Marjorie Clark, *Our Village of Morriston* (Hamilton: Guardian Press, 1982), 128]. We know also that youth were actively engaged in baseball in such places as Dresden where a junior club, for boys under the age of eighteen, was formed on 15 May 1890 [Alda Hyatt, *The Story of Dresden: 1825-1967* (The Dresden News, 1967), 75]. For the purposes of this paper I have attempted to state, when it is clear from the account, who exactly was engaged in the action. It would be highly beneficial for future research on baseball in rural Ontario and elsewhere to delve deeper into such demographic issues.

⁵⁴ “Our College Column,” *The Canadian Independent* 7, no. 7 (July 1888), 223.

⁵⁵ Puslinch Historical Society, “Puslinch Profiles 1850-2000: To Mark the 150th Anniversary of the Township of Puslinch,” (Guelph: Greenmor Printing Co. Ltd., 2000), 76.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 76.

⁵⁷ Cleo Melzer, “Puslinch Past” *Puslinch Pioneer* 5, 2 (September 1980), no page number; back flap.

⁵⁸ “A Revival of Rural Sport,” *Farmer’s Advocate* 57, no. 1538 (16 March 1922), 339.

Ontarians, brought on by work, could be momentarily relieved.

Accounts of baseball being played at picnics and around holidays are numerous. Festivities in Hamilton in 1819 surrounding King George IV's birthday mentioned that, amongst drinking and "march" activities, "the old style of base ball" was indulged in.⁵⁹ At a harvest home festival organized by a Garafraxa church in 1887 "Croquet, baseball, football, etc., occupied the attention of all who wished to take part in these games."⁶⁰ Because this was most certainly a family event, the account seems to infer the participation of many different age groups, skill levels, and genders. In 1910, Dominion Day celebrations in Mosborough included baseball on the bill.⁶¹ The same was true for Morriston's annual Garden Parties in the 1910s, which featured both baseball and girl's softball.⁶² It is clear that baseball was popular at community gatherings and, although the game was sometimes supplementary to other pursuits, it nonetheless represented a relished and anticipated place among a day's activities.

Obviously baseball had become very much a part of rural life. But, along with the game came more regrettable aspects,

most notably gambling, professionalism, and issues of character degradation. These "unseemly" aspects of baseball,⁶³ connotations and associations cultivated over time by the regulation of the sport, forced rural participants, especially youth, to make crucial moral decisions. As it was in urban centres, baseball was not just a simple, joyful game, but also an activity that could threaten through vice. Participation in baseball, both before and after its rise in organized circles, reflected a willingness on behalf of rural Ontarians to negotiate and choose the values they wanted to associate with the game.

Gambling has long lurked at the root of baseball's social circle.⁶⁴ Historian Paul Voisey has noted that, aside from politics and sports, the most popular social activities in Vulcan, Alberta in the 1910s and 1920s included drunkenness, brawling, and gambling. Coincidentally, the sports that proved most popular in Vulcan were those that lent themselves to gambling.⁶⁵ Voisey's evidence illustrates how baseball and other sports did not operate in isolation from other spheres of society such as the saloon. The musk of gain and loss attached to baseball, achieved both honestly and by underhanded purpose,

⁵⁹ *Military Encampment: Souvenir Book and Program* (Hamilton: Ladies' Committee of the Wentworth Historical Society, 1895), 45.

⁶⁰ "News of the Churches," *The Canadian Independent* 6, no. 17 (1 October 1887), 283.

⁶¹ "Mosborough Women's Institute," (Tweedsmuir History, 1947).

⁶² Clark, *Our Village of Morriston*, 128.

⁶³ Bouchier, *For the Love of the Game*, 108.

⁶⁴ M. Howell et al., "Developments Prior to 1800," in *Sports and Games in Canadian Life 1700 to Present*, eds. Maxwell L. Howell and Reet A. Howell (Champaign, IL: Stipes Publishing Company, 1985), 12 and 84.

⁶⁵ Paul Voisey, *Vulcan: The Making of a Prairie Town* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988), 162-63.

meant that the game existed in circles that encouraged not only play, but also profit. For those concerned with moral reform, this seriously undermined the game's value. An 1871 account from *The Ontario Farmer*, in discussion of the different sports in Canada, denounced baseball, stating, "the professional players in the United States [have] cast a taint upon it anything but favorable to its character."⁶⁶ *The Canada Farmer*, a year earlier, was perhaps even more determined to enforce the issue, claiming that:

Rest assured especially that it is a poor game that requires the excitement of betting or staking money on the issue to give it interest. When once the element of gambling is introduced, the play, be what it may, passes out of the range of recreation and becomes vice, in the character of which we know whether most to condemn its meanness or its folly.⁶⁷

In 1875 the same publication blamed the shame of gambling present in horse racing and baseball on American dime novels, published and rehashed in Toronto.⁶⁸ The existence of gambling and professionalism in baseball represented a peripheral culture that, though alluring in the financial rewards and excitement it could offer, created a certain cynicism, or wariness, towards baseball and was evidence that baseball had perhaps sacrificed its image as an honest "game" for

that of a "sport."

In the face of what were, for many rural Ontarians, moral dilemmas, the idea of what constituted legitimate, respectable recreation was strongly debated. In 1870, *The Canada Farmer* wrote that "Let it not be supposed that we would advocate an indiscriminate indulgence in all sorts of amusements without regard to their tendency or associations."⁶⁹ The editorial denounced further the avoidance of injurious and dangerous sports. Readers were urged to remember that recreation was "not the business of life" and was "more properly a relaxation from arduous labour, a refreshment and resting of the powers to give them new vigour for more serious tasks and duties." Too much recreation, the publication warned, would result in dissipation.⁷⁰ In 1871 *The Canadian Independent* warned that if parents didn't discourage talk of horses and baseball their children "[would] be on fire with a rage for sporting."⁷¹ That same year, however, the *Farmer's Advocate* urged farmers to let their children experience more recreation if they wanted them to become "men and women of influence."⁷²

By the early 1870s, the image of baseball in the minds of many rural Ontarians straddled moral lines. One "prejudiced subscriber" writing to his local paper

⁶⁶ "Amusements and Exercise," *Ontario Farmer* 3, no. 8 (August 1871), 424.

⁶⁷ "Recreation," *The Canada Farmer* 2, no. 1 (January 15, 1870), 33.

⁶⁸ "Against Horse-Racing and Gambling," *The Canada Farmer* 12, no. 8 (15 August 1875), 159.

⁶⁹ "Recreation," *The Canada Farmer* 2, no. 1 (15 January 1870), 33.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ Theo L. Cuyler, "A Friendly Talk With Parents," *The Canadian Independent* 16, no. 12 (June 1870), 464.

⁷² "Farmer's Pic-Nic," *Farmer's Advocate* 5, no. 6 (1870), 82.

(perhaps the *Hamilton Spectator*) in 1870 claimed that, compared to cricket and lacrosse, baseball was “just a sandlot sport usually played by undesirables.”⁷³ Engaging in the game of baseball meant associating with a defined crowd and game-culture, notions which, in 1870, were of some concern. A year later *The Ontario Farmer* concluded that, compared to cricket, baseball was too violent and thus not suitable to be a nationally adopted sport.⁷⁴ The idea that baseball was more suitable for some segments of society than for others was a conscious measurement of the sport’s character that, though it admitted its negative aspects, also reflected its positive qualities.

When, in the mid-nineteenth century, sport had connoted social deviance,⁷⁵ by the later decades of the century participation in team sports was viewed as a suitable leisure activity preferable to idleness and frequenting bars;⁷⁶ by then Muscular Christianity, the idea that sport could build character and redeem social problems,⁷⁷ had become a prevalent notion. Rural Ontarians embraced the ideology of muscular Christianity, participating in baseball to instill values of manliness and discipline, to di-

rect energies in a proper and productive manner, and to better equip themselves against the harmful elements of society. In a sense, they were able to confront the negative aspects of baseball and, by actively redirecting them, realize the sport’s potential as an agent for improvement.

By 1874, though debate over sport’s respectability still raged, baseball’s ability to improve the mind and body was already noticed. That year *The Canada Farmer* stated that the manly games of baseball and cricket were calculated to “develop physical muscle and dexterity.”⁷⁸ By 1910 the *Farmer’s Advocate’s* stance on the matter exhibited the degree to which baseball had been accepted. In an item regarding Kent County, farm boys were encouraged to play baseball and football because they “simply have to think fast.”⁷⁹ Also, it added:

In playing games in the country and surrounding towns, the young farmer gets the rough, rustic edge worn off; he meets all kinds and conditions of men; he makes acquaintances in a great many different places, which in after-life may prove of untold value.⁸⁰

Such activity, the article contended, would discourage youth from drifting into town to “spend their time in ques-

⁷³ Roxborough, “The Beginning of Organised Sport in Canada,” 40.

⁷⁴ “Amusements and Exercise,” 424.

⁷⁵ Elliot Gorn, *The Manly Art: Bare-Knuckle Prize Fighting in America* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1986), 137.

⁷⁶ Marks, *Revivals and Roller-Rinks*, 122.

⁷⁷ Nancy B. Bouchier, “Idealized Middle-Class Sport for a Young Nation: Lacrosse in Nineteenth-Century Ontario Towns 1871-1891,” *Journal of Canadian Studies* 29, no. 2 (Summer 1994), 89.

⁷⁸ “International Ploughing Matches,” *The Canada Farmer* 11, no. 15 (1 August 1874), 291.

⁷⁹ R.H. Abraham, “Athletics in Rural Communities,” *Farmer’s Advocate* 45, no. 932 (4 August 1910), 1255.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 1255.

tionable places”⁸¹ such as saloons. By 1914 the same publication, echoing muscular Christianity, claimed, “Many a man owes the measure of self-control which he has in his older life, to experiences on the [baseball] diamond or [football] gridiron.”⁸² The motivation behind the decision of the United Farmer’s Young People of Ontario to start baseball and softball leagues in 1923 also reflected a desire to use baseball as a means of honing the mind and behavior of rural people, namely youth. These leagues served the function of promoting, “clean sport in rural districts as one means of training for Canadian citizenship.”⁸³ By this point, and indeed by the late nineteenth century, baseball had acquired a strong sense of legitimacy, affording youths practice “for the more serious game of life.”⁸⁴

The recognized benefits of baseball could also be seen in the way the sport was preferred to other activities. In 1922, the *Farmer’s Advocate*, which recommended baseball, among other sports, as “the most acceptable games” for farmers,⁸⁵ stated also that “out-door contests are better, physically and mentally, than the motion picture house or the village pool room.”⁸⁶ It is interesting to note that the views toward contesting entertainments suggest a belief that distractions

in town were unequivocally linked with dissipative qualities. Baseball, on the other hand, though often associated with many of the same disconcerting elements such as drinking and gambling, could be emancipated from them. Baseball was a pursuit that could be tamed while the barroom could not escape associations with vice. For physical and mental conditioning to be achieved through baseball, the unsavory elements of the sport needed to be recognized and then dealt with. Though perhaps not an overly difficult process, it was a necessary one.

Because baseball became recognized for its benefits, the sport came to play a role in the attempt to keep the younger generation from leaving the farm for the temptations of the city. As suggested earlier, while boosterism used baseball as a tool for a town’s outward expression, baseball could also be used to create a sense of community pride meant to be experienced solely on a local basis. The author of the 1888 account from Edgar, related earlier, wrote of the baseball game that “As a hint to other country churches, I may say that it was held, as it has been for years, for the purpose of keeping our young men away from the temptations of the neighbouring towns.”⁸⁷ Baseball, in this case, contributed to the feeling of

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 1255.

⁸² “Encourage Clean Country Sport,” 991.

⁸³ Archival and Special Collections, University of Guelph Library. “Minutes of the Meetings of the United Farmers of Ontario Provincial Athletic Committee,” United Cooperatives of Ontario Collection, Leonard Harman. XA1 MS A126 010. File 2, pp. 6-7.

⁸⁴ Donald Wetherell with Irene Kmet, *Useful Pleasures: The Shaping of Leisure in Alberta 1896-1945* (Regina: Canadian Plains Research Centre, 1990), 125-26.

⁸⁵ “Rural Organization for Sport,” 1123.

⁸⁶ “A Revival of Rural Sport,” 339.

⁸⁷ “Our College Column,” *The Canadian Independent* 7, 7 (July 1888), 223.



The team from Kakabeka Falls, Ontario, winners of the Rural Baseball League Championship trophy in 1913. (Thunder Bay Historical Museum Society, 975.114.9)

comradeship so yearned for by the young farmer, the absence of which often triggered a move to the city.⁸⁸

Although farming methods improved with consolidation in the early twentieth century, they brought about social loss and magnified the problem of keeping youth in the countryside. Nineteenth-century urbanization had profoundly changed the makeup of rural Ontario. By 1901, the Province's rural population had decreased from 1,306,405 in 1871 to 1,194,785. Conversely, the urban popu-

lation, by way of both immigration and relocation, increased in the same years from 313,446 to 1,328,489.⁸⁹ As well, industrialization in large urban centres eroded production by tradesmen in small towns, thereby also removing "an intelligent, capable, prosperous and contented population from the country."⁹⁰ Baseball, caught in Ontario's rural-urban shift, both evoked "idyllic rural Canada and championed the qualities of industry."⁹¹ The game represented one form of social engagement that, by strategically bringing

⁸⁸ MacDougall, *Rural Life in Canada*, 132.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 30-32.

⁹⁰ MacDougall, *Rural Life in Canada*, 21-22 and 61-62.

⁹¹ David L. Bernard, "The Guelph Maple Leafs: A Cultural Indicator of Southern Ontario," *Ontario History* 58:3 (September 1992), 215.

a community together for shared interaction, could help to enforce local rural unity against the growing appeal of the urban lifestyle. A 1906 editorial written by an individual from Halton County in the *Farmer's Advocate* proclaimed that "At present a young person from the country, conversing with a relative from the city, is at a disadvantage."⁹² Addressing this concern, a 1921 edition of the same publication stressed the reality that better facilities, such as baseball fields, would make country life more modern and, in relation to city facilities, would aid in "equalizing the attractions which influence rural youth."⁹³ Through baseball, leaders of rural Ontario communities consciously reached out to their youth by attempting to cater to their interests and desires.

In conjunction with the dilemma of keeping youth on the farm, it may be surmised that the organization of rural baseball *was* necessary. An editorial in a 1913 edition of *OAC Review* made this clear. "Why not?" the author of the editorial asked, reminding readers of the benefits baseball realized in the past. "The introduction of the game into every county in Ontario would effect a transformation in the life of the boys."⁹⁴ The idea of *introducing* the game, though perhaps an overstatement, does serve to illustrate the impact of the period's farm

labor shortage. Increased hours of work, by necessity, caused a decreased devotion to recreational activity. Nevertheless, in 1914 the *Farmer's Advocate* decreed that encouraging sport, and time off work to practice it, was one of the best means of encouraging "general interest in the country as a place to live in."⁹⁵ A wish to resurrect the game was a sign of baseball's power as a community builder that, witnessed before the turn of the twentieth century, was necessary once more. But to be most beneficial, the game now had to be organized, a sentiment reflected in a 1922 edition of the *Farmer's Advocate* which recognized that, though spontaneous games of baseball and softball were to be applauded, interest and enthusiasm for the sport were best maintained through the set-up of leagues.⁹⁶

In response to this need, leaders in rural communities were encouraged to arrange competitions between neighbouring districts.⁹⁷ Alex Maclaren, in the pages of the *Farmer's Advocate*, viewed team sport, "continuously and consistently played," to be akin in purpose to rural community organizations such as Good Roads and Co-operative Marketing Associations and Farmer's Clubs. He recognized how sport, like these organizations, required reserved time and scheduling on behalf of a willing committee of rural

⁹² "Country Entertainments," *Farmer's Advocate*, 41, no. 705 (29 March 1906), 514.

⁹³ "Community Halls and Rural Playgrounds," *Farmer's Advocate*, 56, no. 1488 (31 March 1921), 499.

⁹⁴ "Baseball on the Farm," *OAC Review* 25, no. 8 (May 1913), 429.

⁹⁵ "Encourage Clean Country Sport," 992.

⁹⁶ "Rural Organization for Sport," 1123.

⁹⁷ "Modern Diversions in Farm Life," *Farmer's Advocate* 56, no. 1493 (5 May 1921), 741.

residents.⁹⁸ In 1918 the *Farmer's Advocate* observed that Maclaren's organized softball and volleyball programs "have been welcomed as a means of providing sport at picnics instead of sitting around on the ground and fences."⁹⁹ Baseball enriched the value of rural Ontario as a place exuding a distinct, and proud, community spirit rather than pining in relation to larger centers.

Finally, the idea of baseball as an appropriated game in the countryside must be discussed. The national standardization of baseball's rules were often, of necessity ignored or simplified in rural circumstances. The rural schoolhouse provides a good example of this. A 1945 publication from Barrie describes the baseball-like games pupils played because of their practicality and suitability over baseball.¹⁰⁰ Softball, of course, which became popular in rural areas in the early 1900s,¹⁰¹ is the best example of how baseball was tailored to meet the circumstances and requirements of rural Ontarians. The game, developed indoors and then transferred outside,¹⁰² came to prominence precisely because it was easier to play than baseball, could be played by both sexes, and required less space.¹⁰³ Softball and other simplified forms of baseball have allowed us to track

an ongoing engagement with baseball in rural Ontario.

Baseball has been played on finely groomed city diamonds and in back alleys amidst fallen laundry and broken bottles. It has also been played in pasture fields and in stone foundations, which once supported barns. Rural Ontario since 1870 has exhibited a special engagement with baseball. The rural game, though distinct from the highly organized game played in cities, was not isolated from urban influences such as professionalism, gambling, and character degradation. Rural Ontarians, however, dealt with these issues in a way that reinforced rural values. In a very real sense participation in baseball, especially in the first decades of the twentieth century, helped rural Ontarians maintain community cohesion in the face of great challenges posed by urbanization and rural decline.

Rural Ontarians engaged with baseball on their own terms. Their appropriation, acceptance, and rejection of the game's intrinsic qualities, reflected a distinct form of organization. In this sense, baseball was a tool that allowed people to order, understand, and maintain unique values important to the structure and identity of rural Ontario.

⁹⁸ Maclaren, "Organized Play and Recreation," 2109.

⁹⁹ "Play and Recreation," 1293.

¹⁰⁰ In this case, the games described are long ball and German bat ball. *Games and Equipment for Rural Schools* (Barrie: Community Life Training Institute, 1945), no page number (forward), 11-12 and 17.

¹⁰¹ Lappage, "The Canadian Scene and Sport, 1921-1939," 285; Arthur T. Noren, *Softball* (New York: A.S. Barnes and Company, 1940), vii. Lappage says that softball was developed by Canadians but Noren has disputed this, stating that the game has no clear origin.

¹⁰² Jones, "Sports and Games From 1900 to 1920," 171; Noren, *Softball*, vii-viii. Both sources agree on this aspect of softball.

¹⁰³ Noren, *Softball*, ix-xiii.