

# **Baseball in Lehi**

## **By Richard Van Wagoner**

Legend holds that baseball was invented in Cooperstown, New York, in 1839 by Abner Doubleday. On December 30, 1907, a special committee, consisting of prominent baseball executives and including two United States senators, confirmed Cooperstown as the game's birthplace and Doubleday as its originator.

Baseball historians today place little credence in the Cooperstown-Doubleday story. Instead they maintain that American baseball was merely a glorified version of the British game of rounders, which was, in turn an offshoot of cricket, which in some fashion had been played for many years. Although baseball grew up in the United States and has many American embellishments, it unquestionably is an adaptation of a game that has been played for centuries, in which a batsman hit a thrown ball and ran around one or more bases, which might be rocks, stakes, posts, inverted milking stools, or canvas bags.

Before the Civil War, baseball started as an amateur craze played in open fields by clubs of gentlemen. During the war, however, the sport was played extensively behind the lines by boys from farms, factories, and counting houses. These veterans that carried the game back to their communities where it spread like wildfire all across America.

By the 1880's, the sport's popularity had reached Lehi and games were being played in either Simmons pasture east of town (site of Lehi High School), at Murdock Resort, near the lake or in the streets. One of the most interesting accounts in early newspapers was the July 4, 1886 game between the Lehi Cricket Club and the Lehi Baseball Club. The match was played on State Street in front of the People's Co-op. After a well-contested struggle of nearly three hours, the cricket club with sixty-seven runs, was declared the winner. The baseball club had scored just fifty-four times.

In another outstanding game the local boys traveled north to take on the Redsocks, Salt Lake City's finest. It was beautiful day for gaming. The grandstand was full, the teams were on the field leisurely passing the ball about, and the anxious fans began to clap and call for the game to begin. Lehi's pitcher Isaac Taylor shook hands with his opponent, the Redsock's ace, Heber J. Grant, later to become president of the Mormon Church.

Grant was good with a blazing fastball, and a mean curveball. A contemporary account reported, "those balls were coming through like bullets, well placed and curved up, sideways, and were

hard to find with the bat.” His teammates also made an excellent showing: “large, fine looking fellows, well trained, well equipped with beautiful uniforms displaying “red socks”, their name-sake.” Ultimately, the boys from the small town to the south were victorious. The final score was 3 to 1.

Though the Lehi Base Ball Club was a semi-pro team, the boys basically played for the simple enjoyment of the game. Expenses were partially met through the sale of seats (15 cents each or two for 25 cents), though sports-minded businessmen often footed the bill. Lehi standout John Jackson, who played for twenty-two years on the team, recalled that “the nearest I ever came to receiving pay of playing ball was at the time I finished pitching a 15-inning game and won, when James H. Gardner took me by the arm to a store and fit me out with a new suit of clothes, new shoes and stockings, a fine hat, shirt and tie,”

In June 1900, Lehi City Councilman Parley Austin was directed to “try and buy the ground known as the Beck lot near the D. and R. G. Depot as cheap as possible not to pay over Fifteen hundred Dollars.” This historic site of the original Evansville settlement had a beautiful grove of black willow trees on the property-- an important consideration, as shade was at a premium on wilting summer days.

The city borrowed \$2,000 to meet the purchase price and provide improvements. On July 17, 1900, 225 workers turned out and constructed a baseball diamond and grandstand, laid out a bicycle track, erected a fence, and built a dance floor. A tie railing was also put up on the west side of the park for use as a hitching post.

After the grandstand and baseball diamond were built interest in the sport dramatically escalated. In 1908, the grandstand was expanded and bleachers added to increase the seating capacity. Interest in the sport began to decline during World War I when over two hundred of the town’s young men were in the service. As Wines’s Park’s popularity for picnics and reunion was on the rise, the city began deliberations on what to do with the City Park.

High School Principal D.J. Mitchell suggested that it be made into a standard athletic field, enlarged baseball diamond, and improved grandstands. Although the city council voted favorably on this project, the athletic field was constructed just west of the Memorial Building instead. City Park became the Lehi Rodeo Grounds in 1933 when the grandstand, chutes, and bleachers from the Israel Evans Ranch moved to the site.