

The Topeka Owls: pp. 1-5

Historical Highlights
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The Topeka Owls—"Topeka's Team"

This article was written by Doug Wright, former mayor

Professional minor league baseball was played in Topeka as early as the 1880s. Ball players on teams known as the Golden Giants, Kaws, Senators, Owls, Hawks or Reds all had "Topeka" emblazoned across the front of their uniforms, but it was the Topeka Owls in the years immediately following WWII who were truly "Topeka's team." Many of the players on those Owls' teams came from Topeka or the Topeka area and a few others stayed around Topeka after their playing days were over. By day, many of the players held jobs in Topeka or attended Washburn, but in the evenings, they played America's game for the thousands of fans who streamed into Owls Park in North Topeka to cheer on their hometown heroes.

Without question, baseball was the most popular sport in post-World War II America. In 1946 there were 43 minor leagues, each with 8 to 10 teams, located throughout the U.S. The Topeka Owls played in the Class C Western Association against teams from Hutchinson, Leavenworth,

Salina, St. Joseph, Joplin, Ft. Smith and Muskogee.

The Owls franchise had been purchased during the war years by Raymond "Fido" Murphy, a colorful character from the Eastern U.S. who bought the team as a money-making venture. Murphy had umpired in the Western Association before the War and he saw



with his own eyes that Topekans loved baseball as they annually led the league in attendance.

Murphy chose not to affiliate his team with a major league club and instead operated it independently unlike the other seven teams in the league. This allowed him to sign anyone to play for the Owls and not be restricted to playing ball players whose contracts were owned by a major league team. At first, Fido invited several members of the Chicago Bears of the National Football League to play on the Owls, thinking that play-

ing a summer of baseball would be a great way for the footballers to stay in shape during their off-season. He also had the good sense to sign a number of players from Topeka and the Topeka-area to play for the Owls and he found the local talent pool to be deep. Murphy signed players from Topeka High, the Mosby-Macks and Decker Oilers.

When Murphy opened up spring training in 1946, he had so many players that he decided to field a second team in the lower class KOM League that would serve as a farm club of Topeka's Owls. He placed his team in Chanute and named them the Chanute Owls, staffing the team with local stars Lee Dodson from Topeka, Ross Grimsley from Americus and John Bulkley from Reading. The Chanute Owls powered their way to the KOM pennant and even beat the Topeka Owls in -cont., p. 2

1 One Chicago Bear played for the Owls. Raymond "Scooter" McLain appeared in 91 games in 1947.
2 Topeka High, coached by Claude Hays, won the State Championship in 1947, defeating LaCrosse 26-0. Six players from this team would go on to play professional baseball.
3 Capitol Post No. 1 was the official sponsor of this American Legion team, but Mosby-Mack Ford provided financial support. The Mosby-Macks won 6 State Championships between 1945 and 1953.
4 The Decker Oilers were a Topeka-based semi-pro team that perennially battled for the State Championship which they won in 1948.

—cont. from p. 1 → an exhibition game held at Owls Park in North Topeka. After the season, all three local players were promoted to the Topeka Owls.

The 1947 team had the most talent—and most local talent—of any of Topeka’s minor league teams up to that time. Team Owner **Fido Murphy** turned the managerial duties over to **Winlow “Windy” Johnson**, a farmer from Burlingame, who pitched five seasons with the Owls. Johnson’s pitching staff was bolstered by two of the youngsters Murphy promoted from the Chanute team, big right-handed **Lee Dodson** and left-handed **Ross Grimsley**.



Winlow “Windy” Johnson, Lee Dodson & Butch Nieman celebrate an Owls victory.

For power, the Owls turned to 29-year old **Elmer LeRoy “Butch” Nieman** who starred in the Owls’ lineup over five seasons, leading the Western Association in home runs each year. Butch Nieman played three years in the major leagues for the Boston Braves during the War and in 1947 he was working as a Supervisor at Good-year and raising his family in Topeka. Teammate John Bulkley said, “When it comes to hitting, Nieman was in a league by himself.” The Owls led the league in attendance with 115,000 fans and finished second in the League Standings

with all four local stars named to the Western Association All-Star team. Bulkley was chosen at 2nd base; Nieman in the outfield; Dodson as the right-hand pitcher and Grimsley as the left-hand pitcher.

After the season Lee Dodson reminded Owner Fido Murphy that he had promised to pay Dodson a bonus if he won 15 games. Dodson had won 18 in the regular season and one game in the playoffs. Fido reneged, saying the offer wasn’t in writing, so Dodson appealed to George Trautman, the President of the National Association of Professional Baseball—essentially the Commissioner of the Minor Leagues. Trautman upheld Dodson’s claim, fined the Owls \$500 and suspended Fido from all club activities for one year. Fido still owned the Club, but he couldn’t participate in any management decisions.

It took Fido about two months to decide it was time to sell the Owls and leave town. He found a group of Topekans willing to purchase the franchise led by **Mrs. Ethel Mohney** as the principal



Owls GM Frank Silva and Owner Ethel Mohney hang curtains in the dugout.

stockholder and minority stockholders, **Lester Goodell** and **Link Norris**. Mrs. Mohney was a self-described tomboy who grew up in a man’s world and was a success in business. She was part-owner of “The Lounge” a Topeka restaurant, and a machine shop that produced parts for Beech aircraft. At one time she also owned a tire store. She was one of eight ladies holding an executive position in all of baseball, and the only one “to have bought herself in.” As a novelty, Mrs. Mohney’s photo was published in newspapers across the U.S. showing her to be adding a feminine touch to the team by hanging curtains in the dugout. Mrs. Mohney owned the controlling interest in the Owls for two seasons, from late 1947 until January, 1950, when she sold her interest to Link Norris. Lester Goodell continued as a minority stockholder.

One innovation the new owners brought to the local baseball scene was to have an organ installed at Owl Park. Ole Livgren⁵, a popular local entertainer who played morning, noon and night on several WIBW radio shows and in the evenings at Mrs. Mohney’s restaurant, was asked to play for the fans and he did...through the years of the Owls and, later, for the Hawks and Reds.

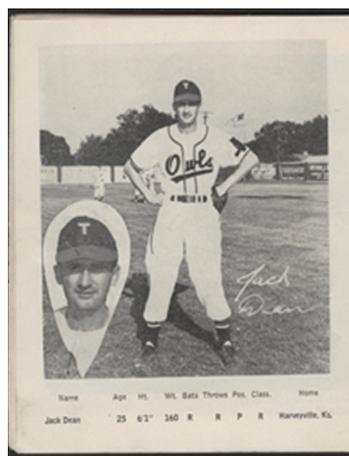
The 1948 Owls were managed by **Winlow Johnson** and later by **Butch Nieman**. Among the local talent were **Dick McConnell**, **Richard Pahmahmie** and **Duane Melvin**. Dick McConnell, age 18, was a 1947 graduate of Topeka High School who played for the

⁵ Ole Livgren was the uncle of Kerry Livgren, musician with the progressive Rock band *Kansas*.

Owls for four years while he attended Washburn where he starred in both football and basketball. He was an infielder whose batting average improved each year from .221 to .260. McConnell went on to become the winningest high school basketball coach in Arizona. Richard Pahmahmie, age 26, was a left-handed pitcher who played five years with the Owls. He was a Pottawatomie Indian from Mayetta whose best years with the Owls were 1948 and 1949 when he was 13-3 with a 2.51 ERA and 18-10 with a 3.63 ERA. Duane "Blackie" Melvin was a multi-sport star at Seaman High School and Washburn University who played four years of professional baseball. His one real year with the Owls was 1948 when, at age 22, he hit .211. In 1954, as a final curtain call, he was signed by the Owls and had one "at bat." He went on serve as a coach for 38 years at Meriden, Emmett, Robinson, Rossville and Seaman high schools.

The 1949 Owls finished the league in fourth place and again ousted the top seed in the playoffs, but again finished second for the year. Topeka's attendance led the league at 116,136. Butch Nieman was still the manager. He had three new local players—all pitchers—on his team that year: **Jack Dean, Ed Wilson** and **Alex Grieves**.

John "Jack" Dean was born in Marion, Kansas and graduated from Harveyville High School where his father was his coach and, after earning both an undergraduate and masters degree from K-State where he played basketball and baseball, Dean joined the Owls. At age 25, this was the first of five years Dean spent pitching for the Owls. He won 19 games in 1951 and 1953, 18 games in 1952, the year he was named in mid-season to be Manager for the Owls. 1952 was Dean's last year with the Topeka Owls and, at the time, Dean was said by team Owner Link Norris to be "the most respected ball player in the Western Association."⁶ At the end of the season, even the Joplin team recognized Dean



Jack Dean

for his sportsmanship and presented him with a gift piece of luggage. Dean, who had served as an Assistant Basketball Coach at Topeka High during his baseball playing days, went on to serve many years as the head basketball coach at Topeka High and later at Salina South High School.

Ed Wilson, age 20, was one of six players from the 1947 Topeka High team to play professionally. Wilson, a pitcher, won 18 games for the Miami Owls in 1948. His team had replaced the Chanute Owls as Topeka's farm club. He was 6-3 with the Topeka Owls in 1949, the only year he played for Topeka. He would spend five years playing minor league baseball for other teams.

At age 21, **Alex Grieves** from Burlingame, Kansas pitched just one year with the Topeka Owls. He also pitched the previous year with the Miami Owls. Grieves lost his first 5 games in Miami before winning 6 straight. With Topeka, Grieves won 9 against 11 losses. Following his baseball career, Grieves worked at Topeka's Air Force Depot and DuPont plant, did some officiating and coached his son's baseball and basketball teams.

In 1950 **Mickey Mantle** played in Topeka—not for the Owls, but for the Joplin Miners. Mantle was a prodigiously talented 18-year-old, in his second year of professional baseball. In 1951 he would open the season as the centerfielder in Yankee Stadium., but in 1950 Mickey was Joplin's shortstop and, at the end of the year, he was voted MVP of the league. Mantle led the league in hits and had a .383 batting average. Then, at age 32, Butch Nieman was almost as good, hitting .314 with 28 homers to Mantle's 26, and with 149 runs batted in to Mantle's 136. Years later, after Mickey was an established star in the major leagues, a Topeka sportswriter asked him what he remembered about playing in Topeka. Mickey said, "The guy playing the organ." That was Ole Livgren!

Two Topeka High graduates, Howard "Mace" Pool and Richard Burgardt made the Owls team in 1950. Mace Pool was born in Circleville. He and teammate Richard Burgardt played for the 1947 THS baseball team and won the state championship. Pool played in the minor leagues for four years – two with the Owls. Burgardt, born in Wichita, only played one year in professional ball, but split his time in 1950 with the Owls and two other teams. Afterward he became a regular on the Decker Oilers.

—cont., p. 4➔

⁶ The Manhattan-Mercury, August 27, 1952.

—cont. from p. 3→ The year 1951 was momentous for the Owls in many ways. First, team owner Link Norris reached a working agreement with the Chicago Cubs, thus ending the Owls' independent status, and setting the stage for the phase out of the local ball players. Second, the Owls broke the color barrier by fielding two African-American ball players, **Solly Drake** and **Milton Bohannion**, sent by the Cubs to Topeka to further their minor league careers. Third, it rained throughout the summer, flooding Owl Park.

Drake and Bohannion lived with a local Topeka family and roomed together on the road. Manager Butch Nieman recalled having to make housing and transportation arrangements for Drake and Bohannion when the team traveled to Joplin and Muskogee, but otherwise, the two were accepted as popular teammates. Drake's year was cut short in mid-August when he was ordered to report for induction into the U.S. Army. At the time, Drake was leading the team in hitting with a .324 average and leading the league in triples. The Owls fans in attendance that day took up a collection and presented Drake with \$191.51 as a sendoff gift. Despite finishing the season a few weeks early, Solly Drake was selected to the Western Association All-Star Team and, when the Owls were awarded the League Championship, his teammates voted him a full share from the League's Championship Pool. After his Army stint was over, Drake returned to baseball and played two years in the major leagues for the Phillies and Dodgers.

By mid-July, 1951 Owl Park was under several feet of water, as was much of North Topeka. Out of necessity, the Owls home games were moved elsewhere. They played a few games at the Highland Park High School field at 28th& Indiana, a home game in Holton, and a home series against the Salina team in McPherson, Kansas. It proved to be impossible to control admission to these games so Owner Link Norris resorted to passing the hat throughout the stands in a futile attempt to offset the team's financial losses.

Owl Park had suffered significant damage from flooding. By July 24, Link Norris asked the League to extend the season by two weeks to make up games. His proposal was voted down by those teams losing money, as it would have just prolonged and increased their losses. As a consolation and a gift to the Owls, the Playoffs were canceled due to the rains and the Owls, which were leading the League Standings at the time, were awarded the league championship.

In 1952, the Chicago Cubs continued to provide money and players to the Owls and they sent a playing manager to skipper the team. **A.J. "Matty" Matulis**, age 32, was in his last year in organized ball as either a player or manager. On August 3rd he was replaced as manager by **Jack Dean** who, along with **Richard Pahmahmie**, were the only two local players still on the team. This would be Pahmahmie's last year with the Owls and Dean would play one more year before turning to basketball coaching that ended up at Topeka High. The Owls finished fourth in the Western Association with an attendance of 64,957; the first time they had averaged less than 1,000 per game.

The Owls fielded teams in 1953 and 1954, but minor league baseball was becoming a harder sport to sell to fans. Major league baseball was expanding and would soon stretch from coast to coast. Televised games between major league teams offered more-

recognizable players and were easier and cheaper to watch than the local minor league team. After the 1954 season, the Western Association folded. A year later, the Philadelphia A's moved to Kansas City, bringing major league baseball within driving distance of Topeka.

After their playing days were over, the players

from the Owls, many with young families, turned their attention to their careers and their families. Many of them ended up passing on their knowledge and love of America's game to the next generation as school teachers or weekend coaches. **Lee Dodson** and **Butch Nieman** established the **Babe Ruth**



Owls Park from Centerfield

League for boys 13-15 in Topeka and each coached a team in the league. (I was too young to ever see the Owls play, but I learned to appreciate the game from my Babe Ruth League Manager, Butch Nieman...as we competed against Lee Dodson's Tecumseh teams and others from throughout Topeka.)

As the years pass, it seems that nothing stays the same—not even the great game of baseball. But in Topeka's recent past, the great game of baseball was celebrated and played at the professional level by our hometown heroes—*the Topeka Owls!*

NOTE FROM OUR SCHS LEADER

Hello Shawnee County Historical Society members. My name is **Nathan McAlister**. I am a history teacher at Seaman High School. I have taught for the past 24 years and it is an honor to serve as your President. As the newly elected President of the Shawnee County Historical Society I would like to take this occasion to reflect on the past year and look forward to the year ahead.

The Covid-19 pandemic has, as with so many, left us with many obstacles. We have seen the number of visitors dwindle. In 2018 and 2019, visits to the Ritchie House exceeded 2000, last year that number fell to just over 500. As a society, we made the decision to cancel the highly successful Historic Homes Tours. We have also postponed our annual banquet, hoping for better days ahead. Financially, the year was neither a windfall nor a detriment, thanks to **Bob Totten**. Bob was able to secure a **Covid-19 grant** to offset our losses. Additionally, Bob has partnered with **Dillon's Foods**, whereby households can donate directly to the Shawnee County Historical Society through the Dillon's rewards program. The year 2020 was definitely one for the history books, as the cliché goes.

Despite the obstacles we have faced, we have managed to create opportunities. We have taken our programming and outreach to the virtual world. Through the incredible efforts and talents of Christine Steinkuehler, Bob Totten, and others, the society has forged a new path hosting **Sunday History Talks** with local and regional experts. These programs have been a resounding success and attendance has steadily increased with each subsequent presentation. Past programs have been as diverse as the attendees and include such topics as **The Cherokee and the Civil War**, the **History of Topeka's Fire Department**, **United States Colored Troops in the Civil War**, and

the **History of Real estate in Topeka**.

Future topics will include: **Transportation History of Topeka**, **Fred Harvey and the Fast Food Standard**, and **Historic Buildings of Topeka**. With these suc-

cesses, the society has been able to increase membership, which we hope will translate into increased participation in the future. I am optimistic, that the days ahead look bright for the Shawnee County Historical Society.

In December of 1946, a group of like-minded Shawnee County residents, "expressed interest in the preservation of local history decided to do something about it. They proposed the formation of the Shawnee County Historical Society." Today, some 74 years later, the society envisioned by a small group of history enthusiasts remains. This society has witnessed much, from the landmark **Brown v. Board of Education Supreme Court case**, the **Flood of 1951**, a **Tornado in 1966**, the **Decline and Resurgence of the City of Topeka**, and yes, even this **Pandemic**. Through it all, we have been here to bear witness and tell the story of Shawnee County. So it is, with an eye to preserving our past that we look forward to the future. I look forward to working with you in the year to come.

I leave you with this statement from the first bulletin of the Shawnee County Historical Society, December 1946: *"We're here. We hope to stay and live long and prosper."*



Nathan McAlister

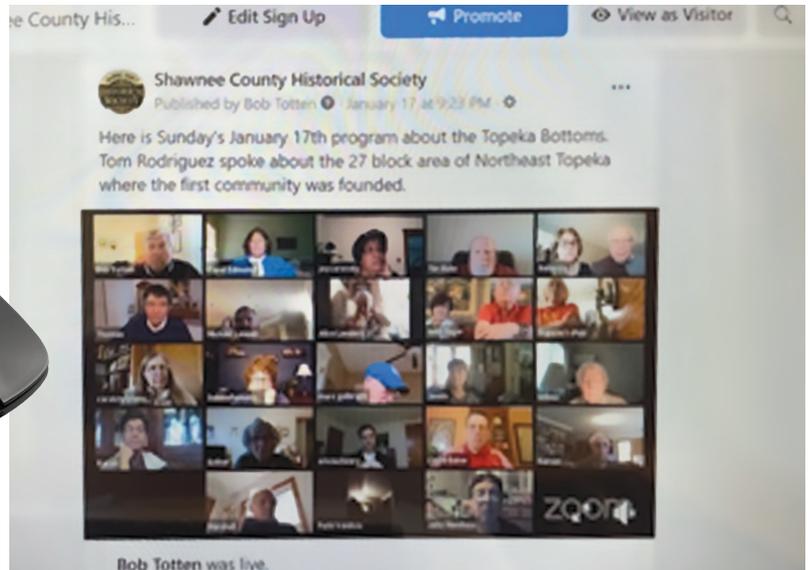
Zoom Seminars Keep Society Busy

With the pandemic in full swing, the Society came up with an idea to sustain those of us who want to know more about history.

It is the **Zoom Seminars on Sunday Afternoons.**

Thanks to the help of our **program chair, Christine Steinkuehler**, we have been able to conduct zoom meetings on various topics including the **Topeka Bottoms**, the **Minor League baseball teams of Topeka**, the **Topeka Fire Department** and **much more**. We have entertained upwards of 85 people each Sunday when the 3 pm Seminars are underway at Zoom.

If you interested in joining us, we will provide you a link. Just email us at shawneecountyhistory@gmail.com



Speakers List for Zoom Meetings planned so far this year:

January 10th — **Real Estate History of Topeka** forum with **Helen Crow** and **Marshall Barber**

January 17th — **Thomas Rodriguez** on **Growing Up in Topeka and The Bottoms**

January 24th — **Tim Paris** on **The Garlinghouse Company**

January 31st — **Thom Rosenblum** on **Ike Gilberg, Socialism From Behind a Sewing Machine**

February 7th — (Superbowl Sunday)

February 14th — **James Woods** on **Transportation History of Topeka**

February 21st — **Doug Wallace** on **Bennie and Estelle Dickson, home grown Bonnie and Clyde**

February 28th — **Chris Cruz** on **Fred Harvey**: Setting the standard for fast, fine food with an envied concept that started in Topeka.

March 7th — **Paul Post** on the **Bates Family, the Bates Banks and Bates Block** (this is the Topeka Blueprint Building)

March 14th — **Dan Werner** on **Historic Buildings on Kansas Ave.**

March 21st — **Landry Brewer** on **The Cold War and How It Affected Shawnee County**

March 28th — **Brent Campney** on **Race Relations in the 1800's in Kansas**

Would you like to support the Shawnee County Historical Society?

Here is your opportunity. Just fill out the following information below and send it to:

Shawnee County Historical Society
PO Box 2201
Topeka, Kansas 66601



Option B: Send needed info via email
to shawneecountyhistory.org

I want to support:

- Heritage Education for kids \$ _____
- Shawnee County Preservation \$ _____
- Historical Programs/Lectures \$ _____
- Bus Rental Grants for School Field Trip (to help make field trips possible) \$ _____
- Ritchie House restoration and maintenance \$ _____

I also want to renew my annual membership:

- General Membership \$35 \$ _____
- Patron Level Membership \$50 \$ _____
- Renovator Level Membership \$100 \$ _____
- Sustaining Level Membership \$150+ \$ _____

Total \$ _____

Credit Card _____ Exp. _____

Card Number _____ / _____ Plus the code on the back of
your card _____ or Paypal

Exp. ____/____

Historic Lithographs for Sale

The Shawnee County Historical Society is selling **Lithographs from the 1870s**. These are Birdseye views of Topeka and Tecumseh as well as a Map of the Plains in the early 1860s. 

Copies are available for sale for only \$15, with members getting a discount. If you would like to know more about these, **please call (785) 234-6097**. In addition, we have many requests for past **SCHS Bulletins** and they are being sold for \$25 each.



Visit us online for a list of the 85 Bulletins printed between 1946 and 2011
<https://www.shawneecountyhistory.org/order-bulletin>

You can also contact us by email: shawneecountyhistory@gmail.com



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*Lighting Freedom's Pathway;
Building Heritage Culture*

Mark Your Calendars Society Events: Feb. - Dec. 2021:



Historical Highlights *Winter 2021*

- Feb. 6** Superbowl Sunday No Program
- Feb. 14** **James Woods, Transportation History of Topeka 3pm Zoom**
- Feb. 21** **Doug Wallace, Benniw & Estelle Dickson home grown Bonnie & Clyde 3pm Zoom**
- Feb. 28** **Chris Cruz, Fred Harvey, setting the standard for fast, fine food with the envied concept that started in Topeka 3pm Zoom**
- Mar. 7** **Paul Post, The Family: Bates Banks & Bates Block (this is the Topeka Blueprint Building) 3 pm Zoom**
- Mar. 14** **Dan Werner, Historic Buildings on Kansas Av. 3 pm Zoom**
- Mar. 21** **Landry Brewer, The Cold Ward and its effect on Shawnee Co. 3 pm Zoom**
- Mar. 28** **Brent Campney, Racial Relations in the 1800s in Kansas 3 pm Zoom**
- TBA Fall** **Historic Homes Tour**
- Dec. 5** **Annual Membership Meeting Topeka Country Club, 2700 Buchanan Noon**