

Changing the Narrative: Baseball's Debt to Canada

Drunken legislators, taking a break from the procedural wrangling inside the Parliament Buildings for the United Provinces of Canada (effectively today's Ontario and Quebec but known as Canada West and Canada East before the country's 1867 Confederation), lounged outside on the lawn facing Toronto's Front Street in the summer of 1850. A nearby tavern met their refreshment needs while the more active among them "... seemed to have forgotten their position and their duties, as they betook themselves to boyish recreation. Some were playing at ball...".

This description in the *North American* semi-weekly newspaper (published in Toronto on 6 August 1850) is all there is, but a reasonable conclusion is the "boyish" recreation of ball was something resembling early baseball. "Ball" was a name applied to its play in York (today's Toronto) in an 1803 account from the diary of Ely Playter, and most likely what was also played that same year by his brother-in-law David McGregor Rogers 60 miles east of York near the present town of Port Hope.

Throughout the first half of the 19th century there are multiple accounts of early forms of baseball in what is today's Ontario, one in the form of a legislated prohibition, some in school yard memories of one and two old cat, and others of a more oblique character but all collectively confirming that early proto forms of baseball were as common here as well as in other parts of settled Canada (the earliest being in New Brunswick in 1793) alongside their occurrences south of the border.

This folk custom of play lingered well into the 19th century in the United States. To the extent Americans brought such play into what became Canada in the latter part of the 18th and early 19th century it came not as an American identified or developed game but as an English folk custom, and some of that ball-playing tradition may have come directly into Canada from Britain itself.

Baseball's folk play was akin therefore to the way in which traditional European Christmas observances first arrived in the United States and were then celebrated in the new world before Clement Moore, Charles Dickens, and others created our modern, very different idea of the seasonal event. Early "base ball" was like a letter posted from Liverpool which, though passing through New York

on its way to the early settlement of Toronto (then known as York), had few if any meaningful American features.

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VOLUNTEERING IN NEW BRUNSWICK.
SAINT JOHN, N.B., January 27th, 1869.
To the Editor of THE VOLUNTEER REVIEW.
SIR,—During the first three or four years after the landing of the Loyalists in 1783, a large portion of those who intended to make the city of Saint John, their future home and place of business, were occupied in the erection of Wharves and Stores, with dwelling appartments under the same roof, for the accommodation of their families and trade operations.
In less than five years, the trade of the the title of "The Loyal Volunteer Artillery of New Brunswick." John Clowell, merchant, was chosen captain, and under his command, the Battery made its first parade for inspection on the 4th day of May 1793. The number of officers, non commissioned officers and gunners, on the muster roll, was ninety six, and comprised nearly all the leading merchants and mechanics in St. John at that period. A copy of the original muster roll is now in my possession. In those days it was the custom of those merchants connected with shipping, to close business about 4 p.m. and after dinner, for those who belonged to the artillery, to give an hour or two on two or three days of each week to drill, while others would engage at a game of base ball on a portion of King's Square, which had been prepared for the purpose. For several consecutive days before each yearly inspection, the

Friday, July 10, 1874
The Woodstock Sentinel
+ 60% ÷
"Training Day" in 1819.
GEO. III'S BIRTHDAY AND ITS CELEBRATION.
An old resident of Hamilton furnishes the Times with a sketch of the 4th of June, "in Olden times when George the Third was King." He writes from memory and thought; his account is brief; it is none the less interesting, especially after the celebration of our own more modern and National Day, July 1st. He says:—
The 4th day of June, in the earlier days of Hamilton was decidedly the most lively of the whole year. On this day the general training (as it was called) of the "Men of Gore" took place. All the men liable to militia duty in this locality had to "fall in" in the morning and answer to their names and perform such Company drill, &c., as the officers might see fit to command or were able to give instruction in. The preliminary Company drill invariably consisted of the men of each Company clustering round the Captain, while he called over his list of names. The word "march" was then given, and a halt made in front of a store, when a painful er more of "blackstrap" was compounded and passed around until all were satisfied. This delectable drink was made by mixing rye whiskey and West India molasses, and was altogether a most deceiving beverage. After all had partaken to their heart's content (and there were no laggards in this regard in those days), the real warlike aspect of the day came to the front. All disputes and quarrels during the past year were then settled by personal encounters. It has come to be understood that there was "no law on the 4th of June," and it seemed to be a fact, as no interference was ever attempted in the numerous pitched battles which took place all over the village on "training day." The old style of base ball, jumping and horse racing were also indulged in, and altogether a most jolly time was made of King George III's Birthday, for such it was.

Notable amongst these was baseball play on the 4 June holiday in Upper Canada celebrating not only the birthday of George III but also marking the annual mustering of volunteers for brief military practice. An item from the Woodstock Sentinel of 10 July 1874 entitled **"Training Day" in 1819** and subtitled **Geo. III's Birthday and Its Celebration**, is significant not only for confirming the disputed 1838 Beachville account, but demonstrates a more direct role played by Canadians in developing a continuity of performance necessary for the modern game to triumph. Such human agency, though often overlooked, challenges a passive image of Canadians as recipients of American and British cultural hegemony.

Nevertheless the commonly accepted story remains, namely that baseball was a game developed by Americans from its English folk roots and imported into

Canada in its modern form, where it prospered though usually with a commentary noting its “south of the border” origins and status as the national pastime of the United States. American historians and baseball researchers have generally accepted this point of view and Canadians, seemingly, had little reason to challenge it.

Baseball in the United States, and what initially passed from there into Canada, however was, until well into the 19th century, a folk game retaining its “looking back” identity and owing its origins to English and European sources. Only by the 1830s was it gradually shedding this past for a modern character. A major influence for this was cricket, which only a few years before had finally taken off in an ordered and continuously played form, and at the same time, in both Canada and the United States.

Baseball’s modernization, at least until the time of the American Civil War, was a work in progress amongst rival interpretations in New York, Philadelphia, Massachusetts and places in Canada. With the exception of New York these rivals turned out to be a form of Neanderthal man. Nevertheless the DNA of baseball’s successful “Homo sapiens” brand from New York City still retains in its “genetic” makeup aspects of the child-like joy as found in what came to be called old-time or old-style baseball with its attendant leaping, jumping and dodging, such as Ely Playter recorded in his 1803 diary account.

As well without such regional outposts of experimentation baseball’s successful New York interpretation might have forever remained a New York-centric game. As it was however, that game with its harder ball and removal of the “plugging” aspect found fertile and eventually supportive grounds farther afield including Canada.

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November 2018