

Baseball is Life: Amateur Baseball and the Importance of Leisure in
Butte, Montana, 1920-1960

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Abstract

Through much of the first half of the 20th century, baseball was predominantly an amateur game played and enjoyed by adults in local communities across the United States. With a focus on amateur baseball in Butte, Montana, this paper discusses the local practice and meanings of the game of baseball in the United States from 1920-1960. The case of Butte reveals how working people's participation in the adult amateur form of baseball helped cultivate, through the symbolism and the practice of the game, a local culture that integrated leisure, community, and cooperation. Through amateur baseball, and other forms of leisure, Butte residents endured a complex life full of both tribulations and triumphs.

"Baseball was our life! We'd walk miles to play ball. You lived baseball, really, that's the whole thing, you lived baseball. You knew everybody that played ball." –Sonny Hicks, recalling his days as an amateur baseball player in Butte Montana.

In 1935 Butte's local newspaper announced: "Old King Baseball returns to his throne here today, ballyhooing his Butte entree with a game at Clark Park, starting at 2 o'clock."¹ The declaration of Opening Day for the 1935 Montana State League offers a glimpse into the larger story of amateur baseball played throughout the United States during an era when baseball was "king," a story often hidden in the shadow of voluminous accounts of professional baseball leagues. Surging in

popularity in the last quarter of the 19th century, baseball reigned as the "national pastime" in the United States at least through 1950.² Writing about the "hold the game [of baseball] ha[d] on the American public," a sportswriter for The Butte Miner wrote:

Talk all you please about your horse races, your tennis, golf, coursing, polo, lacrosse, boat racing and kindred other sports, there is only one that will make a man forget home and mother, and that is the greatest of all sports ever invented by man for summer entertainment for the masses, baseball.³

This pronouncement rang true for many in the United States living in rural towns, urban neighborhoods, various Indian reservations and, finally, in Butte. While Major League professional baseball represented the pinnacle of all aspirations in the game, the amateurs who played baseball lived out their dreams in countless adult leagues on town or neighborhood teams. Before the advent of television, these amateur leagues and teams provided the sporting spectacle in the daily lives of baseball fans. The Butte story represents only one vibrant local version of national American cultural sporting devotions set on baseball.

Although professional baseball enjoyed an early brief history in Butte followed by a reappearance in the 1970s, amateurs played the game in organized adult leagues continuously through the first half of the 20th century.⁴ Through the nearly five decades between 1900 and 1943, Butte's amateur baseball players fielded teams in two levels of leagues of various configurations. The better amateur players formed one or more teams, depending on the year, representing Butte and its neighborhoods in the more competitive State League.⁵ The rest of the players played on teams sponsored by local businesses or clubs in the City League. The state level leagues came to an end after the 1943 season, but amateur baseball continued in Butte with the emergent local league, the Butte Copper League.

By the 1940s softball began to take hold in the Mining City, but the Copper League was firmly entrenched, drawing over 136,000 fans in 1948, and continuing through the 1960 season.⁶ In this era of Butte baseball, the amateurs took the field, and, depending on the year and the importance of the game, hundreds or thousands of fans filled the stands virtually every night during the summer months in ballparks at the Columbia Gardens, Clark Park, Hebgen Field, the Cinders, and Parrot Flat. Far from the urban centers that housed the major league teams, Butte remained distant from the professional game, but baseball thrived with its various amateur adult leagues. To return to the opening quote from a player who once clouted a pitch from Satchel Paige over the center field wall at Clark Park in Butte and pitched his team to victory over the Kansas City Monarchs, working people who “lived baseball” formed, played on, and supported those amateur teams.

Since American cultural formation over the past century has developed alongside capitalism, baseball can provide a window on how the working class negotiated culture. A major area of negotiation in early 20th century United States involved the meanings and values of leisure and work—what to do with and how to conceptualize human time. As Weber explained, under capitalism the dominant conception of human time became pragmatically defined in terms of efficiency and rationalization with interest in increasing profit.⁷ Gruneau contends rationalization was so central to the culture of industrial capital that play and sports became “increasingly replete with the constraints characteristic of capitalist market operations: specialization, standardization, bureaucratic decision-making, over-reliance on technology, and the constant drive for efficiency and maximum production.”⁸ This contention can readily be seen in the structure of baseball in its standardization of rules, division of labor and space and statistical quantification of pitches, hits, runs, outs, innings, etc. In this development, the spread of baseball helped reshape the American

populace in cultural conformity with the conditions of rationalization and the demands of capitalist forms of industry in the United States.⁹

However, Pope reminds us that sport "can't be described simply as a means whereby the masses are manipulated into conformity with the social order, for to do so is to regard people as passive dupes, ignoring their capacity to resist control and to stamp sports with their own culture."¹⁰ People were drawn to baseball not simply because it reflected rationalization necessary in the industrial workplace. They embraced baseball because it was pleasurable. It celebrated local and alternative cultural conceptions for human living, and it became an expression of community. Partially in this recognition and influenced by Thompson and Guttman, historians of working class culture turned to questions in the history of sport that, as Reiss comments, looked "closely at their folklore and recreations, their pastimes and sports, for it has been in leisure more than in politics or in labor that many men and women have found the deepest sense of meaning and wholeness."¹¹ The explorations of working class sporting culture, then, have opened the door for a better understanding of how, in local terms, people embraced leisure for meaning and wholeness.

Because of the central role it played in American society, baseball, as Tygiel states, "with its long, rich, and well-documented history remains a powerful vehicle for exploring the American past."¹² Despite the attention to working class sporting endeavors, the voluminous literature on baseball has neglected adult amateur baseball, although much of what people did with the game, how they used, transformed, consumed, and made sense of it played out at the amateur level. In short, we have little understanding of the agency of working people, as creators and actors of culture and meaning, when it comes to the game of baseball at the amateur level. As a cultural behavior form similar to that of a

labor union, baseball helped workers cultivate areas and ideals of human life that were increasingly threatened, if not excluded, from American culture under the weight of capitalism, and, Weber would argue, Protestant tenets and values.¹³

As Butte residents developed the game, it symbolically, and in practice, affirmed important American cultural alternatives. Through a look at amateur baseball from an interpretive cultural stance with attention to symbols, practice and local context, we learn something new about Butte, about American culture, and about the process of negotiating cultural values and practices. Not everyone participated in the game, and the cultural themes I interpret from the practice of baseball were certainly not the only forms present in Butte, but they represent some prominent cultural patterns and meanings on the local level.

The practice of baseball reflected two sets of cultural meanings evident in people's memories and stories about baseball and prevalent in interviews from my larger ethnographic study of the community.¹⁴ Two key phrases Butte elders used illustrate the local alternative culture: "that's just life" reflects community conceptions of time and the nature of life itself and "all in the same boat" concerns conceptions of cooperation and the interconnectedness of community. The degree to which they become locally meaningful can be demonstrated by people's biographical and community stories. Such stories, narrative constructions reflecting experience, reveal how baseball in Butte embodied these values, and, as an important form of leisure, served as a metaphor for life in this community.

Work and Leisure in the Richest Hill on Earth

Butte, Montana, affectionately referred to by its natives as “The Richest Hill on Earth,” is best known for its copper wars and labor union tumult in the first decades of the 20th century.¹⁵ Butte’s labor radicalism gave way to a system of labor organization and solidarity that struck an enduring social contract with the main mining employer, the Anaconda Copper Mining Company, from the 1930s through the early 1980s. The union base established in the mines fostered labor organization that included nearly every wage-earning occupation in the city--from miners and trades people to bartenders, retail clerks, and waitresses and punished “scabs,” workers who crossed a picket line to work during a strike, with the local equivalent of social death.

Butte residents complimented their labor solidarity and hard work by cultivating other meaningful aspects of human life. Strong traditions of celebration and leisure, adapted to and suitable for the modern U.S. context shaped by industrialization, capitalism and nationalism, provided avenues for cultivating enchantment.¹⁶ In addition to seasonal celebrations in the various ethnic enclaves, city wide parades traced the streets on Miner's Union Day, the Fourth of July, and St. Patrick's Day. The doors to numerous neighborhood bars welcomed patrons daily, and their main uptown counterparts served three shifts of miners around the clock. Butte’s people bowled, danced, ice-skated, visited, and ate cherished ethnic, celebratory foods and patronized the Columbia Gardens, a floral and amusement park resting at the foot of the mountain range east of the city. Some even spent a few moments in the red-light district, and many tried their luck on the blackjack, roulette, and craps tables in one of the city’s many supper club casinos. Butte’s citizens also formed numerous fraternal organizations and garden clubs. The Anaconda Copper Mining Company recognized the importance of these leisure activities and financially supported both the Columbia Gardens and

Clark Park, the central baseball field and skating rink of the community. Baseball provided a focal point of summer leisure activity with people playing in or attending one of the nightly games of the local adult amateur baseball leagues.

“That’s Just Life”

My grandfather, Tony Mihelich, died from cancer in July of 1950 at the young age of 41. In a discussion about the death of her husband, my grandmother paused on the thought that his untimely death was due to God’s will, and concluded, “That’s not God, that’s just life.” My grandmother never could accept the notion that God was responsible for her husband’s death. Her son and author, Emil Mihelich, born and raised in Butte, explores death and other “endings” in his fictional *Around the Horn*.¹⁷ Mihelich’s story unfolds in Butte in 1949 with a plot centered on a family of characters and the last baseball game played by a 41-year-old man, Pete Kristich. Through the storyline and character development based on his experience and understanding of Catholicism, baseball, family, and community in Butte, Mihelich discusses the “religion” that gave form to many lives in Butte. He echoes his mother’s sentiment, and Eisely’s argument, that death and other such “endings” are natural.¹⁸ By extension, all of life’s brutality is necessarily natural. As Mihelich’s story reveals, humans can triumph over such pain, not by removing it but by transcending it through the creation of what he calls “enchanted moments,” meaningful life enhancing experiences. In Butte the Catholic Church played an important role in generating such moments. It offered a place for worship, “meditation,” as one Butte elder called it, provided a ritual format for marking and progressing through life stages, afforded a yearly schedule for observances, and presented symbols, devotionals and sacraments that infused life with meaning.

It also offered its doctrine for an articulation of the nature of life, but practice emphasized the ritual of pre-Vatican II Catholicism. While people in Butte did not articulate this understanding and most found little cause to question God's will, Mihelich argues that baseball, like life, dramatized pain and triumph in the sacred confines of the ballpark, and that baseball, like the Church, helped produce the enchanted moments that mediated the pain and staved off the absurdity and injustice with which the pain was seemingly distributed.¹⁹

Baseball generates, and symbolically demonstrates, unpredictability with all its accompanying pain and pleasure. Human error can turn a game one way or another as can bad bounces or fluky hits. And perfect ball striking can lead to an out. One's beloved team, in spite of how "worthy" they seem of winning, can lose at virtually any time, and the satisfaction of seeing a base hit is enhanced by the painful fact that the very best hitters only strike the ball safely only a third of the time. For a working class generation that came of age during the Great Depression and lived on wages garnered in the dangerous shadow of underground copper mines, the absurdity, pain and promise of baseball resonated with their experience.

In solving the perennial riddle of how to endure time and the "monstrous demands of life,"²⁰ people in Butte participated deeply²¹ in leisure and play to help generate "enchanted" moments. While the narrow conception of time fostered under capitalism's demands for efficiency largely discouraged the "attitude of contemplative 'celebration'"²² entailed in leisure and play, Butte faithful collectively engaged in creating enchanted moments at Clark Park in the summer. Nearly all of the fifty elderly people in Butte I interviewed shared fond memories of baseball at Clark Park as most of them had gone to watch such games, even though only a small portion of them participated as ballplayers.

The participation in baseball as players or fans provided Butte residents with a physical space and a moment in time when the principles and values of baseball took center stage. The “return” of “Old King Baseball” was no normal day, and leisure, expressed in the form of amateur baseball, was deeply valued as an adult pursuit.

In Butte, like in many communities across the United States, hundreds of fans, thousands for key games, attended games nightly. Butte residents reported as many as 5,500-6000 fans at playoffs. For a quarter, fans found hours of entertainment and experienced a sense of community. Many Butte residents shaped their summer routine around the game, as one recalled:

I mean people...wouldn't even go home and eat. Because, by the time they got home to eat and go out there, hell, some of the game was already over. They didn't want to miss it and they'd say, “we'll eat after.”

Other individuals successfully rearranged shifts in the mines to accommodate their playing schedule. Another man reported:

Oh yeah, baseball was our life!...if you were a ballplayer you got a good job, day shift and everything. When I played ball, I had to work day shift.

Although most of the players came from the working class, the fans reflected more diversity. One woman noted:

Everybody came. The players' families...all the businessmen, the bankers, the morticians, everybody came to the games. All the clerks in the stores. It was cheap entertainment and it was good baseball. Everybody would come to the game, not just the player's wives, they were always there of course. But then there was all the businessmen and everybody else...because baseball, that was it! They had some good players. Then they played some

good side teams²³ and that would bring a lot of people. Everybody from around town all came down.

The numbers of adults that participated in baseball clearly indicates the popularity of the game, but the stands reveal the fans' intense participation, as one man remembered:

It was a very interesting league, and in the stands sometimes they got nasty. Oh! It got nasty, believe me. I think your grandmother will tell you that. It got real nasty. I mean some of the words that were exchanged...I tell you that sometimes it was funny that there wasn't more fights up in them bloody stands, oh the things they'd say. Neighborhoods against neighbor.

In fact, my grandmother exchanged a few words with a woman in the stands who yelled to her husband, after he struck out, "You're no kind of ballplayer!" My grandmother, not one to spark a public spectacle, recalled,

A man at the office the next day said, "Rose, I thought you were a lady." I said, "what do you mean?" He was razzing me. He said, "I've never seen you start a fuss like that before in all of my life." I said, "I just got mad at her because she yelled at my husband. I had to stand up and tell her what I thought." That's what I told her, "if your husband was any better ball player than mine was, he'd be in the Pacific Coast League," but he wasn't. He said, "I don't blame you."

While in this case the conflict emerged from a wife's defense of her husband, most of the tension in the stands stemmed from neighborhood rivalries spurred on by fans supporting their teams. Butte neighborhoods were ethnically segregated, helping create this tension revealed in playful ethnic rivalry. One man remembered:

What made it so good is that they were neighborhood teams...they had...the Miner's Union and that was for everybody but you had the Silver Bow Parks, Northside, you had McQueen

and Hub addition, they had the South Side teams. And consequently in neighborhoods people would come down from the Northside all together and came out and supported us.... South Side had theirs, the Parks had theirs, Miner's Union, and McQueen, so they all had their own, you know. And it got to be not only a rivalry on the field but a hell of a rivalry in the stands.

Another woman recalled:

A lot of people used to come. Like the little old ladies from McQueen that used to come just because their team was playing. Anytime McQueen played they'd come to the ball games and they had little glasses of whiskey with them. They drank during the game, and they'd root for all of the players from McQueen. That's the only time they'd come to a ball game was when McQueen played. A lot of elderly people, husbands and wives, they always came to the ball games.

The tension in the stands reflected the importance of the game for its fans. It also reproduced and reflected the day to day tensions involved in an interactive community, and it may even have helped mediate them. But the close integration and resonance of adult participation in local baseball and the daily interactions outside the ballpark served to enhance the significance of the local game—"every game meant something" as one player remembered the Copper League:

They were good games, every game meant something. It wasn't just like, "ah hell, it's just a ball game," every game meant something. The fans would urge you on you know...It was good entertainment, people would go to the ballgames and talk baseball the next day.

While baseball existed outside the realm of work, numerous financial angles marked the amateur game. Some teams in Butte paid some players outright to play. One man remembered a particularly skilled player:

Oh hell, we gave him a full split to come in and pitch. We put him up in a hotel...for the playoffs. He had to pitch certain number of games to become eligible and we brought him in each time and gave him money and his meals and lodging. And he'd go back home. Some players in a way they kind of resented it but I told them. I says, "look, if you want to get to the top," I says, "we got to do it this way, there's no more, nobody around here I can get." I says, "I need pitchin.' You guys don't understand this business, but I do." I says, "I need it, I'm gonna get it regardless of where the hell I go get it. I'm gonna get it." Of course...Parks had Lefty Mehrens, he was a hell of a pitcher. Cheated like hell with the balk move but he got away with it.

Hiring such talented individuals to pitch was expensive and people from around the community would chip in with financial assistance. Some provided actual cash, but, for the most part, this support took the form of in-kind services. The same man reported:

I'd bring a player in and get the money for his expenses. And we'd give him money for his lodging. We had a deal with a woman who had a hotel there on Park Street. She was a great Northside fan and she was giving us a rate. And, oh, we had angles that we worked.

Even Butte mining companies were involved in, but not in control of, the monetary investments in amateur baseball. In line with other research that reveals capital often promoted sports to meet its ends, Butte mining companies sponsored teams over the years and paid players or gave them a "do nothing" job in the mine. And the Anaconda Copper Mining Company maintained some of the ballparks. An ex-Copper Leaguer explained how individual players, particularly pitchers, would travel to play for money for other teams in the region. One example involved an excursion to play and work during the construction of Fort Peck Dam on the upper Missouri River near Glasgow,

Montana during the 1930s. One man from Butte who played at Fort Peck remembered talking with his boss after a couple of weeks on the job:

He said, "Can you get a couple of more ballplayers up here for us?" I said, "yeah," cause times were pretty tough in Butte...you couldn't get a job then during the Depression, it was really tough. I says, "yeah, I can get them, but how am I going to get them up here?" He says, "take my car down," he had a brand new Ford. He says, "drive my car down to Butte," and that was over a four hundred mile drive, that was a long drive from Fort Peck Dam, way in the Eastern part of the state. I says, "well, OK, Red if you want to trust me with your car." So I drove down and seen your grandpa, I says, "Hey Tony, you want a good job?" He says, "what doing?" I says, "playing ball...all you got to do is walk around the yard up there, you don't have to do nothing, just walk like you're going someplace doing something, that's all you got to do." Because these government jobs, a lot of guys didn't like to see that happen, guys that just played ball and just, let the government pay for them, you know, so I says, "All you got to do is walk around with a paint can in your hand or something like you are doing something."

The men were out of work in the Great Depression in Butte, but, through baseball, and Franklin D. Roosevelt, they found paying "jobs" and were able to play baseball.

Because towns from around the region also took their baseball seriously, Butte players made money playing for teams from other communities. One man remembered quitting professional baseball because he could make more money for hire in Idaho:

I used to go down and play ball in Idaho. They gave me fifty dollars plus expenses a game. That was quite a bit of dough. I had to pitch awful hard down there. They had all salaried

ball players down there. Even people that were in the Coast League the year before were down there. They really took their baseball to heart. And in towns like Post Falls, Pocatello, Idaho Falls. I went up with St. Louis, that's when Dizzy Dean and Paul Dean were in the minors. And they were gonna farm me out to Arkansas. See in them days, when you were a rookie, all you made was about fifty bucks a month and your room and board when you were breaking into professional baseball. And that's when I was playing in Butte and pitching down in Idaho making 50 per game. I didn't go to Arkansas, I came back to Butte. I had guys down there in Idaho who come to me in one inning and they'd say, "hey, I'll give you five bucks if you strike this guy out this time," and stuff like that, you know.

Rooting for players and neighborhood teams, drinking during games, arguing with one another about players, and talking about the game the following day were common social activities.

Through such interactions with teams representing particular neighborhoods, Butte baseball helped define and strengthen the community structure, with the formal social organization of numerous leagues indicating the significance of the endeavor. Baseball challenged both hope and despair in a playful and symbolic manner as the fate of one's team unfolded during the game. The cherished memories and stories of Butte players and fans make it clear that the community of Butte participated in baseball because this form of leisure helped with the "imposition of meaning on life." They valued leisure, and they went to great lengths to preserve it and its accompanying conception of the human endeavor through controlling work with their labor organization, through continuing ethnic traditions, and through participating in the game of baseball.

In collaboratively and playfully creating meaning for life, Butte residents contested the dominant values associated with the industries in which they were employed. The play of baseball in Butte served as a form of celebration—of life, of the sun in seasonal fashion, of vitality, of enchantment. That play also cultivated moments of celebration, along with moments of agony, which symbolically served to affirm a conception of life that confirms brutality as a natural part of existence. The depth of participation by working people in baseball significantly contributed to their life experience and their humanity as they used the game to counter or balance dominant values of work with leisure. Everyday life, organized according to the values and principles of leisure, provided a resilient plausibility structure that sustained a cultural formula for a meaningful and rich life, taking individuals beyond the dominant culture of work that emphasized rationalization and materialism.

“In the Same Boat”

Butte residents did not simply adopt baseball. Working people owned, operated and controlled Butte amateur baseball leagues and the sport itself on the local level. Returning for a moment to the financial aspects of the amateur game, spectators paid to attend the games, but that money was redistributed by and to working people. Most of the money went to the players at the end of the season as one player remembered:

We got the split in September...one year they got six hundred and another year it was five hundred and some, but the least was four hundred and twenty five dollars.

Beyond controlling financial aspects of baseball, working people also controlled the ends to which the game was played. Baseball in Butte had purposes unto itself, entirely outside the realm of work, including the purpose of entertainment and celebration. However, it also served purposes involving the value of cooperation, personal and collective identity, and prestige. While it cultivated the conception of leisure, baseball also balanced the emphasis of the dominant culture on individualism, competition, and cooperation, with the particular understanding those same values held for working people in this local U.S. community.

Cooperation is imperative to the industrial workplace, and it enables efficient production. But it also enables safety and survival, particularly in the case of underground mining. Cooperation enabled survival during the Great Depression and supported people through enduring existential crises that, including death of children, workers, and the elderly, as well as illness and suffering, that working people faced in abundance during this period. Cooperation enabled the collective control over the work process and the labor market through unionization. And it enabled the collective celebrations so necessary to a culture of leisure. Most importantly, perhaps, it enabled people to build the culture that provided meaning for lives premised on the principle of leisure.

Benefit games played by the leagues and their representation of alternative systems of distribution revealed the complex relationship between individuality and cooperation. The various collective identities of Butte—ethnicity, religion, community, neighborhood, occupation, family--incorporated individuals into an interlocking network of social groups and helped create individual distinctiveness. But they also came with requirements and expectations. Individuals bore a responsibility to their groups, their identities, and other members in their group. Benefit baseball

games illustrate the prevailing attitude of duty and responsibility to social groups. Benefit games were played for individual players or their families, for youth baseball leagues, and for benefit funds.

In June of 1950, a month before my grandfather died, a benefit game was played in his honor to help my soon-to-be widowed grandmother and her two young children. My grandfather could barely walk, but he attended the game for a short time. My grandmother recalled that day:

They knew that we had bills. He hadn't worked for quite a while, so the league president decided to have a benefit baseball game for him. The president said, "he's entitled to it, he's given people all this entertainment for nothing so they should have something for him." They had the game, that was a sad day though. He went to the game and we walked in and everybody got up and clapped...He only sat down for forty-five minutes...he got a big hand when he walked out of the baseball field and he came home and he was so depressed because he couldn't play because he loved the game. It was kind of sad. I think we got about fifteen hundred dollars. That was a lot of money back then. We got checks from all over. Helena, ...Helena had a team. Every year he went to Polson to play, and I even got checks from Polson, from some of the players that knew him. I got a lot of money in after. One woman sold her house just about the time that he was sick, and she came over, and she gave me a fifty dollar check. Quite a few people sent me checks.

The proceeds from the benefit game helped my grandmother in the six-month transition from homemaker to full-time primary wage-earner. The players of the Copper League and the people who organized the benefit game acted out of both respect for an individual and a sense of responsibility to a group and one of its members. My grandmother remembered:

It was more like a...kind of like a community gathering. Everybody cared about everybody else in the neighborhood. For instance, your grandfather played baseball, and he got terribly sick, but right away there was a baseball benefit, right away. All the people got together. But that was because they gave a lot to the public, all the entertainment and everything else. They all felt like they owed him something. Like some woman said, "We owe those ball players a lot because we had cheap entertainment all of these years. All we can do is help them out now when they need it because they have been so good to them because they had some good entertainment."

People of Butte fulfilled this sense of duty through membership in many groups including fraternal organizations and their female counterparts as well as in local parishes, labor unions, and garden clubs. Social responsibility, the contribution and duty to the social group, was essential for the maintenance of social order in the community of Butte. It promoted the individual understanding that one belonged to something larger than oneself and that one faced the accompanying responsibilities.

Amateur baseball also provided Butte residents with a means of achieving status as adults beyond that which one's occupation or social class afforded. This achievement stands in contrast to the dominant value of material success whereby prestige is rendered to those who are most economically successful. While the working class might have aspired to the lofty goals of economic success, Butte's citizens measured that success collectively and not exclusively individually or competitively. For example, contract miners worked hard and competed among each other in ore production, but they collectively negotiated the price for that ore and only a very few broke ranks in those negotiations. As a consequence, few among the working people disdained their working class

status or that of others. Of course, like most Americans, Butte residents wanted their children to have an easier life that became more feasible with the G.I. Bill and the access to education, particularly for whites, after WWII. However, those who remained working class staunchly defended their position in the economy and cherished the multiple status positions available to them outside of work or economic avenues. Baseball provided one of these avenues as local working men with player status, sometimes even star status, most obviously benefited from the recognition garnered from their playing field proficiency.²⁴ People recognized them around town as ballplayers, children looked up to them, men and women admired them, and people talked about their exploits on the field.

The prestige extended to families, fans and the neighborhoods whose teams they played for. Spectators received prestige, and identity, vicariously through the players who, in an important sense, represented them on the field and throughout the community. In this regard, the system was open to nearly everybody--regardless of class, gender, race, and age. However, everybody didn't enjoy equal access in a playing capacity. Placement on a team was difficult to come by and often was determined by who you knew rather than how well you could hit or field. Athletic ability was distributed differentially. Women did not have the opportunity to play, and local players were sometimes denied positions through the recruitment of exceptional players from other communities. But, despite these important limitations, fans and community members could access the prestige system controlled by the working class. Even African-Americans in Butte gained limited entry into baseball, although they were largely excluded from the mines—not to mention Major League professional baseball. Throughout this era of amateur baseball in Butte, the local African-American

community fielded a segregated team, the Colored Giants, in the same league alongside the other local teams.

Baseball gave working people an opportunity to celebrate local individuals like them in contrast to the celebration of wealth and those exclusive few who possessed it. It gave them stories of mythic proportions to tell and believe in contrast to the Horatio Alger stories that celebrated economic achievement at the expense of all else. It gave them the opportunity to be fully “American” even without ever achieving economic wealth. In short, it helped them affirm, celebrate and endure their lives entrenched in the working-class. In a broader sense, baseball symbolized the various statuses and levels of prestige based on community participation, available to working people, regardless of economic motivation or opportunities. Thus the game of baseball itself provided an alternative prestige system in the community.

In the case of Butte, and thousands of communities like it during this era, participants in local adult amateur baseball engaged through a direct connection to the players and teams. The drama that unfolded in the spatially and temporally isolated ballpark was interconnected with the one that played out on the streets in daily life. The local game mirrored the arrangements in the community. The teams were comprised of “real” people who lived in neighborhoods. The players were “real” bus drivers, miners, store clerks and bar tenders. The other fans in the stands interacted in and outside of the park. The games were played for real causes and needs in the community. The cooperation and sacrifice on the field mirrored that reflected in local labor unions and schools. The proceeds of the games were distributed among those in the community, and the heroes created on the field were also heroes, at least at times, in other local contexts. And faces witnessing agony and

celebration on the field and in the stands paralleled those that witnessed the same at local wakes or even uptown at Christmas. Thus the myth enacted on the diamond, complete with symbols and metaphor that emphasized the relationships put on ritual display at the ballpark, was directly relevant to local participants and solidified the experience of community. It symbolically and financially responded to local community material needs. But, more importantly, it symbolically and directly contributed to the local cultural valuation of non-material interests of daily life, with leisure being one of these significant interests. Although positively valuing leisure and play often runs contrary to capitalist ideology of hard work and efficiency, both remain human interests transcend class lines. Baseball was more than simply serious leisure to Butte's working people. The opening quote by a former player noting that "baseball was our life," presaged Mihelich's contention that baseball is, "the ultimate existential game and the perfect metaphor for life itself."²⁵ It was life because it was an extension of the everyday social relations. It was a celebration of everyday trials and triumphs, and a ritual embodiment of a culture that celebrated the creation of meaning through leisure. Both symbolically and literally, baseball in Butte represented an alternative philosophy for life among the working masses in a particular place and time. Such was the profound appeal of "America's Game" in the Mining City.

¹ *The Montana Standard (Butte)*, May 5, 1935.

² For thorough discussions of the early history of baseball see Warren Goldstein, *Playing for Keeps: A History of Early Baseball* (Ithaca, NY, 1989), 17-63; and Melvin L. Adelman, *A Sporting Time: New York City and the Rise of Modern Athletics, 1820-70* (Urbana, IL, 1986), 121-44.

³ *The Butte Miner (Butte)*, September 16, 1906.

⁴ Professional baseball appeared in Butte in 1902 with the Pacific Northwest League followed by a number of different league configurations in most of the years through 1917 including the Pacific National League in 1903 and 1904, and the Northwestern League from 1906 through 1908 (*The Butte Miner*, April 27, 1902; *The Butte Miner*, August 1, 1903; *The Butte Miner*, April 27, 1904; *The Butte Miner*, May 8, 1906; *The Butte Miner*, May 8, 1908). In 1911, professional baseball again resumed in Butte with the Union Association playing through 1914, followed by the Northwestern League in 1916 and 1917 (*The Butte Miner*, May 8, 1911). The Butte Mines League, the last professional league to play in Butte until the 1970s, played from 1920 to 1927 sporting local teams financed by various mining properties in Butte (*The Butte Miner*, May 8, 1911). For many of the people I interviewed who played amateur baseball in Butte, the Butte Mines League provided the most memorable early venue for watching and learning baseball. After studying the adult players, and even recovering a foul ball or two for use in their own games, the children emulated the adult game on their makeshift children's diamonds located in vacant lots all over the city. In 1927 professional baseball ended for five decades in Butte, but amateur baseball flourished.

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- ⁵ James Scott, "If it Don't End in Bloodshed: The Montana State Baseball League, 1900. *Montana: The Magazine of Western History*, 47 (Autumn 1997), 62-71.
- ⁶ Pat Kearny, *Butte's Copper League*, (Butte, MT, 2003).
- ⁷ Weber, *Protestant Ethic and Spirit of Capitalism* (Los Angeles, CA, 1996[1930]).
- ⁸ Richard S. Gruneau, "Modernization or Hegemony: Two Views on Sport and Social Development," in *Not Just a Game: Essays in Canadian Sport Sociology*, ed. Jean Harvey and Hart Cantelon, (Ottawa, CAN, 1988), 24.
- ⁹ See, Stephen W. Pope, "Negotiating the 'Folk Highway' of the Nation: Sport, Public Culture and American Identity," *Journal of Social History* 27 (1993), 327-340.
- ¹⁰ Pope, "Negotiating the 'Folk Highway,'" 5.
- ¹¹ Elliot J. Gorn, *The Manly Art: Bare-knuckle Prize Fighting in America* (Ithaca, NY, 1986), 13-14, cited in Steven Reiss, "From Pitch to Putt," 163. Also see Douglas Booth and John Loy, "Sport, Status, and Style," *Sport History Review* 30 (1999), 1-26, as they discuss how individuals use sport for identity and status purposes which are essentially lifestyle communities.
- ¹² Jules Tygiel, *Past Time: Baseball as History* (New York, NY, 2000), x.
- ¹³ For interesting parallels and differing application of some of the ideas I draw upon, such as key ideas from Weber (1996/1930) and Geertz, *Interpretation of Culture* (New York, NY, 1973), see also Gelber, "Working At Playing: The Culture of the Workplace and the Rise of Baseball," *Journal of Social History* 5 (1979), 12-5.
- ¹⁴ See John Mihelich, *The Richest Hill on Earth: An Ethnographic Account of Industrial Capitalism, Religion, and Community in Butte, Montana, 1930-1965*, *Dissertation, Washington State University, 1999*.

¹⁵ See: Jerry W. Calvert, *The Gibraltar: Socialism and Labor in Butte, Montana, 1895-1920* (Helena, MT, 1993); Mary Murphy, *Mining Cultures: Men, Women, and Leisure in Butte, 1914-41* (Urbana, IL, 1997); Janet Finn, *Tracing the Veins: Of Copper, Culture and Community from Butte to Chuquicamata* (Berkeley, CA, 1998); Michael P. Malone, *The Battle for Butte: Mining and Politics on the Northern Frontier, 1864-1906* (Helena, MT, 1995); David M. Emmons, *The Butte Irish: Class and Ethnicity in an American Mining Town, 1875-1925* (Urbana, IL, 1989).

¹⁶ See especially Mary Murphy, *Mining Cultures*; Janet Finn, *Tracing the Veins*, John Mihelich, *The Richest Hill on Earth*. See also Nancy Kleniewski, *Cities, Change and Conflict: A Political Economy of Urban Life* (Belmont, CA, 1997).

¹⁷ Emil Mihelich, *Around the Horn* (Lincoln, NE, 2002)

¹⁸ Mihelich 2002, 90.

¹⁹ Mihelich 2002, 121.

²⁰ Mihelich 2002, 53.

²¹ See Clifford Geertz 1973, 434, for a sense of how I refer to “deep play.”

²² Pieper, *Leisure the Basis of Culture*, (New York, NY, 1953), 54.

²³ “Side teams” is a reference to the traveling teams, such as the Kansas City Monarchs and the House of David, that stopped in Butte for exhibition games. Most often, Butte players assembled an all-star team to play the traveling nines.

²⁴ See Melvin L. Adelman, "The Early Years of Baseball, 1845-60" in *The New American Sport History* edited by S.W. Pope (Urbana, IL, 1997).

²⁵ Mihelich 2002, 185.