

Small town special challenge made baseball different game

By Gordon B. Seavey

Now that the baseball World Series is about to take place, there is sure to be some quick calls by umpires which will upset the fans.

When a student at Westford Academy, on many an occasion, we would use the services of a local farmer who was never hesitant about calling them as he saw them.

He was Harry Hartford, who lived on his parents' hard scrabble farm just around the corner from the present Academy building on Hartford Road.

Harry was a bachelor, noted for his laziness, and he often complained about his legs even though he could run like a deer in fast spurts. I think he was flat-footed.

But I guess he was a good umpire since his judgement was all we had when the Academy played Littleton, Groton, Ayer or other high school teams. Our competitors were necessarily from nearby because of transportation problems.

As he worked the game, he acted like a king. His philosophy was: "Look sharp...call 'em quick...walk away quick."

Whenever there was an argument, and when he was surrounded by angry fans and players, he would scout out from the small group and run, not "walk away quick."

Academy team

If Westford Academy in those days didn't put out impressive teams, remember that the school enrollment for all four grades was usually around 60 students. Therefore, there was not much material available from which to draw to form a baseball nine.

And they received little coaching, unless umpire Harry Hartford appeared on the scene. I remember his "hidden ball" trick never failed.

I was a member of the Class of 1922. Size was against me then as an athlete, and I also wore eyeglasses. And if I was ever called upon to play, I was usually assigned to right field, where one was supposed to "shag" balls, rather than ever catching one.

One day I did catch an important fly ball and thought I was a hero. But my prominence didn't last long. I struck out at the plate shortly thereafter.



EARLY IN THIS century, the Westford Athletic Association ball team poses with manager Fred Hartford (center, back). Rival teams included Graniteville, Townsend, Littleton, Nashua, Groton, Lowell and Lawrence, with games played on fields like the one scratched out on the J. Willard Fletcher farm down by Stony Brook. (Photo courtesy of June Kennedy)

Our school building is now the Roudenbush Community Center, very handy to the Whitney Playground, which had the only standard baseball field in town. For "scrub" games, we used the common, but the flagpole in the center was always in the way. Or, if a hayfield had been cut recently, we would set up markers for bases, marked off accordingly to the stride of the player chosen to do so.

There were few spectators and no cute girls jumping up and down leading a cheering section.

We knew nothing about soccer or football. Mrs. Whitney had given the town the only public tennis court, so that was used frequently, but I don't remember playing out-of-towners. The girls played basketball on the top of the Roudenbush School on a court that was far from standard — narrow, high walls and poor light. There was little room for spectators.

The girls' costumes were long cotton stockings, heavy bloomers and bulging middy blouses with scarves. Some sexy outfit.

The girls didn't know what a smashing game of tennis was as they lobbed the ball, back and forth, underhanded.

We knew nothing about field hockey, ice hockey, football, archery and all those goodies today's students excel in. But most everyone had a croquet set

on the front lawn.

Town team

Lack of good playing fields was a hinderance to encouraging athletics for no budding baseball first baseman, for example, could go very far playing on Fletcher's Stony Brook Farm's pasture with its many obstacles and moveable bases.

The dedication of the Whitney Playgournd in 1910 was a most welcomed addition to the social and athletic life of the town. Built with moneey given by Mrs. Hiram Whitney, a swampy and useless piece of land between Frost School and the Acadmey (now Roudenbush Community Center) was turned into a standard-sized baseball diamond plus a tennis court, now expanded to two.

Popular, too, were "town teams", those made up from young men of the community, mostly husky farm boys. Called the Westford Athletic Association (W.A.A.) they played similar units from other area communities.

A good athlete and a great booster of sprts was John C. Abbot, treasurer of the Abbot Worsted Company. Call "Jack" by young and old, he urged his company to support baseball, soccer, bowling and other sports. The makeup of the baseball team was slightly semi-pro, as was the soccer team. Trips out of town, especially soccer, was

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Baseball different game then

□ BASEBALL

Continued from page 7 accompanied by the Abbot Worsted Band, which wass far from semi-pro. This was in the 1920s and longer.

The extensive Abbot playground in Forge Village was and

still is a busy place for outdoor sports, thanks to the Abbots.

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