

A BRIEF HISTORY OF PROFESSIONAL BASEBALL IN ARDMORE,
OKLAHOMA, AFTER WORLD WAR II

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I
The Sooner State League

Minor league baseball enjoyed a resurgence following the return of the GIs after the Japanese surrender. People had money to spend, leisure time, not many recreational alternatives on warm summer days and, especially important for the minor, nights. Night baseball was pioneered by the barnstorming Kansas City Monarchs of the negro leagues who carried their lighting with them. By 1947, night games were the norm for the minor leagues.

Leagues sprang up with teams in every state. The baseball boom peaked in 1949 with 59 leagues in 438 cities. Attendance totaled nearly 42,000,000. Oklahoma was no exception. The Sooner State League, a Class D league, began its ten year life in 1947 with the Lawton Giants, Ada Herefords, McAlester Rockets, Ardmore Indians, Seminole Oilers, and Duncan Cementers playing a 140 game season. Only Ardmore (Cleveland) and Ada (St Louis Browns) had major league farm agreements. The rest were independents that

scouted, signed, played, and sold local baseball talent.

McAlester defeated Ardmore 4-1 to win the first pennant.

The Indians ended a twenty year absence of professional baseball in Ardmore. Following a brief Texas League appearance in 1904 as the "Territorians," Ardmore had been represented by D league (the lowest class of organized baseball) teams through the teens and twenties in the Texas-Oklahoma, Western Association, and Oklahoma State Leagues.

Ardmore was the only franchise to remain in the same city for the league's ten year life. From 1947-1952 Ardmore's teams were known as the "Indians." Little is remembered of the Indians. A grave in Rose Hill Cemetery memorializes Cary Don Bigham who died at a week shy of his 14th birthday in 1953. The marker reads "Loyal Batboy for the Ardmore Indians." The Indians were affiliated with Cleveland in 1947 and 1948 and operated as an independent through the 1952 season. The Indians drew over 35,000 fans each year through 1951. A last place finish and attendance of only 24,000 placed the Indians near bankruptcy in 1952. To keep baseball in Ardmore, the franchise was sold to Waco Turner who negotiated a working agreement with the St. Louis Cardinals. The Indians had played in a ballpark on the north side of Ardmore where Will Rogers Elementary is now located. A new ballpark named "Cardinal Park" was built at the end of east Main Street. The Cardinals won or were in

the finals each year of Turner's 1953-1957 tenure. The Sooner State League, the last Class D league west of the Mississippi, folded in before the 1958 season, a victim of television and air-conditioning.

II

The Season of the Rosebuds

The Shreveport Sports, a long time member of the Texas League, left that league as an independent without a major league affiliation to join the Southern Association, a segregated league, following the 1957 season. The Sports' departure was due to Louisiana's segregation laws prohibiting white and black players competing on the same field. By then, all Texas League teams had black players whom they could not house or play in Shreveport. And by 1957, most minor league teams were either owned by or had working agreements with a major league team. No big league team would affiliate with the Sports since black players could not be developed there.

The Texas League awarded the city of Victoria, Texas, the Shreveport franchise. The owners were the Baird's of Pasadena, California. Mrs. Baird named the team the "Rosebuds." Whether that refers to Pasadena's roses or Victoria's rose garden in Riverside Park (where the ballpark

is located) is unknown. The Victoria Rosebuds entered into a working agreement with the Los Angeles Dodgers. The Bairds sold the franchise to local businessman Derrest Williams following the 1959 season.

The Rosebud's uniform was unique. The team colors were Columbia (light) blue and pink. The home uniform was a tackle twill script "Rosebuds" in the same style as the parent Dodgers. The road uniform was a block "VICTORIA" in the same colors. On the left shoulder of both home and road jerseys was a chain-stitched rosebud in pink and green. The cap was the same blue with an embroidered "V" in the style of the old Brooklyn Dodgers.

Victoria was the smallest city in the league. The move of the Oklahoma City Indians franchise to Corpus Christi placed Victoria within 125 miles of the Texas League cities of Austin, San Antonio, Houston, and Corpus Christi (Dallas, Ft Worth and Tulsa were the other teams). This made placing a franchise in a small market practical for the League.

The Rosebuds finished last in the 8-team league in 1958 drawing 79,464 paid admissions (also last in the league). The next year, under manager Pete Reiser, a Dodger legend, the Rosebuds reversed their finish and won the pennant by six games. Attendance grew to a franchise high of 86,040. The Dodger affiliation ended following the 1959 season. The Detroit Tigers placed Hall of Fame infielder Johnny Pesky in

the manager's seat for the 1960 season. He led the team to a fourth place finish and the finals of the playoffs, losing to Tulsa's Oilers in three games. Attendance fell to 69,760.

The year 1961 saw the Rosebuds affiliated with Baltimore of the American League. The Orioles fielded their Class AA farm team under the leadership of George Staller who went on to a successful career as a coach for the Orioles through 1975. The 1961 Rosebuds must fairly be called a weak team. The first five weeks of the season saw attendance at Riverside Park plummet to unsustainable lows. Derrest Williams, the Rosebuds' owner, obtained permission to quickly move the team to Ardmore, Oklahoma. On May 27, the Ardmore Baseball Association opened for business as operator of the Ardmore Rosebuds. A. P. "Pink" Shuman was president of the group. Offices were set up in the lobby of the Ardmore Hotel.

The Rosebuds left Victoria on May 24 for a road trip and did not have time to change their name or uniforms. A new cap with an "A" in the same style as Victoria and relettering of the road jerseys to replace "VICTORIA" with "ARDMORE" were the only changes.

Except for the 1952 season, Ardmore's teams had drawn between 31,000 and 47,000. The Rosebuds finished the season with a 57-83 (.407%) record 33 games behind the first

place Amarillo Gold Sox. Attendance between Victoria and Ardmore was 48,894. While the smallest city in the Texas League, attendance in Ardmore beat the last place drawing team, the Victoria Giants.

The Rosebuds ended the season with 13 loses to only 3 wins the last two weeks of August. Pink Shuman, club president, became ill and resigned. He was honored before 1,389 at Cardinal Park on August 10. By then due to injuries and trades, Ardmore was reduced to a 16 man roster from the normal 21. Derrest Williams, wanting to focus on his interests in the Corpus Christi-Victoria area, advised the League that he wanted to put the franchise up for sale. The same day Rosebuds' batboy, John Saunders, took ten stitches in the forehead following being struck by a broken bat.

While bleak for the most part (e.g., losing the season series to San Antonio's Missions 3-19), there were some high points. On May 29, Al Nagel hit four homeruns in a single game. Pete Ward, who went on to a major league career with the White Sox and Yankees, batted .333. Catcher Frank Zupo was called up to the parent Orioles following the season.

Despite reports in the Sporting News, Waco and Opie Turner could not come to terms with Williams. The Rosebuds were put on the block. On October 12, the Rosebuds were sold to Duke City Baseball, Inc. and became the Albuquerque

Dukes. Ardmore, the smallest city to have AA Texas League baseball, has been without organized ball since.