Bases of Integration: Immigrants and Baseball in Willimantic, 1910-1939

By Margaret Kurnyk

The history of New England’s mills and textile industries is often told as a history of immigrants. Indeed, the success of industry in New England could not have happened without the immigrants, and without the mills, the immigrants would not have had a pull factor inducing them to move to the northeastern United States. Textile companies interacted with their employees in various ways, but industrial paternalism, or industrial benevolence, was a common practice. Providing education, housing, and entertainment were ways through which industries demonstrated industrial benevolence. Organizing sports teams, such as baseball, was another way mills asserted their authority to control and appease the employees. However, immigrants created their own ethnic leagues and used baseball to entertain and acculturate themselves.

My grandparents and aunt arrived at Ellis Island on Groundhog Day in 1950. With the help of their sponsors, they came to Willimantic, Connecticut, where they would become mill workers and have five more children. My father, the youngest child and only son, was exposed to Ukrainian culture, language, and food at home. In school and with his friends he was a typical American boy who played sports and teased girls. My father played baseball in Willimantic for most of his early life and once told me that “baseball and football were ways for me to be American. At home I was Ukrainian, but playing sports was a way for me to be like the other kids – to be American.”

Baseball is known as the American sport; the American pastime. It is grouped together with apple pie, hot dogs, and Chevy as being the epitome of American life and culture. Baseball, then, is made for and appreciated by Americans – but what has baseball been to immigrants? During the early twentieth century baseball was an extremely popular sport, and a prevalent activity among Americans. It was an accepted and easily accessible form of entertainment, and was played by people across the nation. The popularity and commonness of baseball in early twentieth century
America provided potential for it to be used as a means of integration. Baseball was praised as having strong American values, and was seen as an easy way to convey these values to immigrants.

Over time, immigrant opinions on the sport and their involvement and reasons for playing changed. At first, immigrants rejected the sport, especially those from Eastern Europe, who found baseball to be a waste of time and a challenge to tradition; but over time young immigrants and children of immigrants began to play the game.¹ In Willimantic, the American Thread Company (ATCO) established baseball leagues as a way to organize and control immigrant workers, and its teams are an example of industrial paternalism and Americanization. These leagues were used as a way to expose immigrants to life in their new country and town. A second type of league, ethnic leagues, were formed by immigrants as a way to socialize, and provided an atmosphere of comradery and familiarity with people from their homeland. Ethnic leagues could be supported through an ethnic organization, such as a Polish Club, or be more informal leagues composed of people of the same heritage. Ethnic leagues were used by immigrants as a way to self-integrate, by stepping away from the mills and taking matters into their own hands.

The early twentieth century was a time when baseball was expanding and becoming more popular, while simultaneously being a time when more people were immigrating to America. In Willimantic, from 1910 to 1939, the number of immigrants settling in the city steadily increased, and there was great diversity in the nationalities of these settlers. Large numbers of Irish, French Canadians, Syrians, Poles, Jews, Italians, and Russians were coming to Willimantic in different waves, many to work in the ATCO mills.² The mills a way for immigrants to earn money, but also a place where they learned baseball.

My research is based on *The Willimantic Daily Chronicle*, *The Sports Review*, and photographs of Willimantic baseball teams. *The Chronicle*, the local newspaper, reported on nearly every game that the American Thread Company Baseball League played – often providing detailed accounts of the games and the players. *The Chronicle* also published articles about immigration and general happenings with ATCO. *The Sports Review* was a 1936 publication that gave a history of Willimantic sports teams, with a heavy focus on baseball. This magazine, as it was called in the foreword, described itself as being “a resume of athletic endeavor in the city of Willimantic,” and included team histories, trivia, and photographs with a hope to “stimulate an interest in Athletics in our home town.”

Photographs from both *The Sports Review* and Eastern Connecticut State University’s Archives and Special Collections give an insightful visual to the topic at study, and take the reader back in time. These sources exemplify the extent to which baseball was played and celebrated, and how much of a community collaboration baseball was. Dozens of different leagues were operating, and rivalries were strong. Everybody was involved in baseball one way or another – whether they were players, league organizers, umpires, or fans – baseball was a huge part of Willimantic life and the lives of the immigrants that resided in the city.

I argue that from 1910 to the late 1930s in Willimantic, Connecticut, baseball and immigrants came together in a unique way, which created new purposes for baseball aside from sport, fun, and recreation. These reasons included Americanization, integration, socialization, and comfort. The popularity of baseball and the prominence of American values in the sport, as well as the formation of mill leagues and ethnic leagues, created these new and different purposes of baseball for immigrants. I further argue that the two different leagues had different functions – mill leagues used baseball purposely to integrate immigrants and establish a unified American working

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class devoid of ethnic roots, while ethnic leagues demonstrated an autonomous and relaxed way through which immigrants socialized and adapted themselves to American life.

Migration to Windham, Connecticut

English colonists first settled in Windham in 1675. John Cates was the first colonist of Windham, settling on part of a tract of land given to the English by Joshua, a man who was half Mohegan and half-English. Prior to 1825, the Town of Windham – consisting of North Windham, South Windham, Windham Center, and Willimantic, was a quiet, rural, and inconspicuous Connecticut town. However, in the early part of the nineteenth century, Willimantic started its change to an industrial area, while the Windhams remained rural. The Willimantic and Natchaug Rivers provided an opportune area for mills and industry - specifically textiles, but also including paper, grist, and saw-mills – and when the industry grew, so did the population. By 1833, Willimantic was incorporated as a borough, and by 1893, the borough changed to a city. Railroads increased travel to Willimantic and helped to spur population growth. Rail lines to Hartford, New London, New Haven, Providence, and Boston came to Willimantic. In 1900, the city had a population of 10,137, and was the place to stop at between Boston and New York City. All of this industry, growth, and travel made Willimantic an ideal area of settlement for many immigrants.

From 1854 to 1898, the Willimantic Linen Company dominated Willimantic business and industry. Between 1864 and 1880, the Willimantic Linen Company was expanding and building new mills. Swedish immigrants, who worked in quarries in Massachusetts, were recruited to do the construction in Willimantic. The Swedes also worked in the mills, but were more likely to be office workers, rather than laborers. The Swedish were treated better than most immigrant and ethnic

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groups by native-born Anglo-Americans. The Swedish population in town was significant and permanent enough that they established their own Lutheran church.  

Until the Civil War, the textile industry was worked largely by “Yankee girls” – women from throughout New England who left their homes to work in a factory town. However, after the Civil War, Irish immigrants entered the city and took over the labor force of the Willimantic Linen Company. By the 1870s, the French Canadians had joined the Irish and were the primary workers for the Willimantic Linen Company. The Irish and French Canadians not only brought labor to the city, but also Catholicism, which did not mix well with the largely Protestant native population. The Irish and French Canadians each occupied their own areas of Willimantic, where “New England accents could no longer be heard.” As time moved on, these ethnic groups gained social mobility and acceptance into American, and Willimantic, society.

In 1898 the American Thread Company absorbed the Willimantic Linen Company and continued to operate until 1985, producing textiles and thread – including the thread used to make baseballs. By the early twentieth century, the Irish and French Canadians were no longer predominantly mill workers, and occupied jobs such as teachers and shop owners. Other immigrants took over the mill jobs. Subsequent immigrant and ethnic groups that migrated to Willimantic in the twentieth century were Italians, Greeks, Poles, Syrians, Ukrainians, and Puerto Ricans.

One group of immigrants that came to Willimantic were the Syrians, who arrived around the turn of the century. Many of the Syrian immigrants worked at the silk mill, but they were also

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8 Ibid, 5.
peddlers and shop-keepers. Poles began migrating to Willimantic around 1900, and until the 1930s, they were the second largest group of immigrants settling in Willimantic (after French Canadians). They rented rooms from company houses, and quickly established a community and social clubs, such as the White Eagle Polish American Band of Willimantic, formed in 1919. Other Eastern European immigrant groups that eventually settled in Willimantic included Ukrainians, Estonians, Latvians, and Lithuanians. Most of these people came to America as displaced persons after World War II, in the 1950s.

Italian immigrants settled in large numbers in Willimantic in the 1920s and 1930s. Some Italians worked in the mills, while others owned small stores or carts, from which they sold fruits and vegetables. Around the 1950s, Greeks came to Willimantic either directly from Greece, or from neighboring Connecticut towns and cities. The Greeks worked in the mills, or owned small stores and restaurants. One Greek family in particular owned a candy and ice cream store on Main Street. Greek families established restaurants in town, some of which are still in business today.

In 1898, as a result of the Spanish American War, the United States acquired Puerto Rico, as well as the Philippines, Guam, and Hawaii. By 1917, Puerto Ricans were granted limited citizenship, providing the Puerto Rican people with a unique “privilege:” the ability to enter and leave the United States at will. Thus began an era of Puerto Rican migration to the United States, including to Willimantic. In the 1950s, Puerto Ricans began settling in significant numbers in Willimantic as they were being recruited by the American Thread Company to work in the factories. The late ’70s and early ’80s saw an even bigger increase in the number of Puerto Rican migrants. Reasons why Puerto

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10 Beardsley, *Willimantic Industry*, 144,149,166.
15 Beardsley *Willimantic Industry*, 128-166.
Ricans came to Willimantic range from coming here to join family, to find work (especially with American Thread Company), or because they heard good things about Willimantic.\footnote{Norma Boujouen, \textit{The Puerto Rican Experience in Willimantic} (Willimantic: Windham Regional Community Council, 1984), 1-9} Puerto Ricans and other Latinos are still immigrating to Willimantic today.

**Baseball as an American Sport**

Baseball developed alongside industry, and was America’s first major sport. The first organized games were played in the late 1840s, and it was not long before factory workers began to play ball. The game of baseball provided a contrast to the long, monotonous, and dull days in the factory.\footnote{Steven M. Gelber, “Working at Playing: The Culture of the Workplace and the Rise of Baseball,” \textit{Journal of Social History}, 16/4 (1983): 3-5.} Its purpose as a fun and physical form of entertainment carried baseball’s popularity into the twentieth century. The first immigrant group to establish a foothold in baseball were the English, who used their cricket skills to excel in the sport. The English readily accepted baseball.\footnote{Steven A. Riess, “Professional Baseball and Social Mobility,” \textit{Journal of Interdisciplinary History}, 11 (1980): 237.} The next groups to enter the diamond were the Irish and Germans. By the end of the nineteenth century, Irish players dominated major league teams, but were also considered to be rowdy, drunken hooligans on the field. The stereotypical portrayal of Irish as uncontrollable drunks followed them into baseball.\footnote{Richard Peterson, “‘Slide, Kelly, Slide’: The Irish in American Baseball,” in \textit{The American Game: Baseball and Ethnicity}, ed. Lawrence Baldassaro and Richard A. Johnson (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2002), 55-62.} The Germans saw baseball as a way of “expanding their lower-middle-class opportunities.” They experienced the pinnacle of their success in major league baseball in the first
decades of the twentieth century. By 1910, baseball was acknowledged as a way to gain upward social mobility, and it was becoming ever more popular among the immigrant working class.

In the 1930s, Italians, Jews, and Central and Eastern Europeans arrived in America, but were hesitant to embrace the American sport. Like Irish players who faced negative stereotypes when they the game, Italians were considered to be hot-blooded and temperamental, which created the persona of the Italian ball player. The Italians were likely to Americanize their names, but did not have huge success in the sport until Joe DiMaggio in the 1940s. Jews were reluctant to play the sport, and did not have heavy participation until the late 1930s. Like the Italians, Jews would often change their surnames to hide their ethnicity in order to find acceptance in the game. Eastern Europeans coming to America “were stereotyped as weak, unhealthy, physically unfit, and unaccustomed to [manual] labor,” and therefore were not welcomed to the sport. This exclusion was not necessary though, as Eastern Europeans thought baseball was a waste of time, and potentially immoral. Eastern European parents tried to dissuade and prevent their children from playing baseball because they thought it “distracted them from study or work, and Americanized children at the cost of the traditional culture.” However, parents could not stop their sons from playing the game, and Eastern European names started to appear on team listings.

Connecticut has a rich history of both baseball and immigration. In 1876, a Hartford baseball team, The Hartford Dark Blues, helped to establish the National League, one of the two leagues still operating in major league baseball today. Although this major league team did not last,

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24 Riess, “From Pike to Green,” 135; Reiss, “Professional Baseball,” 245.
25 Riess, “From Pike to Green,” 120-121.
26 Ibid, 120.
Minor leagues thrived in Connecticut, and “smaller communities such as New Britain, Norwich, West Haven, Meriden, Bristol, New London, Torrington, Willimantic and Derby also embraced professional teams at various times.” The early twentieth century was an era when baseball flourished in the state, and thousands of people participated in the sport in major, minor, and recreational leagues. The popularity of baseball is shown in Willimantic Daily Chronicle articles. On Thursdays and Fridays, the newspaper would announce what teams were playing, where the game would be held, and what to expect for the outcome, which excited people and made them look forward to the weekend’s games. These games would then be played on Saturday and Sunday, and on Monday, full reports on the games were published, showing the passion and enthusiasm people had for baseball in this era. The Chronicle was colorful and detailed in descriptions of the games. One article stated that “despite the air-pounding propensities evidenced by the visitors in the first few innings, they looked dangerous and it was not until late in the games that the Emeralds were on Easy Street.” Another told of the feats of the players saying that “In the ninth with two away, “Bob” Walsh… hit one of the longest homers ever seen here, the drive clearing the race track in deep left field.” Baseball, as a form of entertainment, was popularized by the media and portrayed the sport as a fun, recreational, and glorified pastime, worthy of participation by all true Americans.

Baseball developed a set of values that were said to be representative of American values and beliefs. In 1919, sportswriter Hugh Fullerton wrote, “Baseball, to my way of thinking, is the greatest single force working for Americanization. No other game appeals so much to the foreign-born youngsters and nothing, not even the schools, teaches the American spirit so quickly.” This argument was furthered in 1923, when the president of the Baseball Writers’ Association, Frederick

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28 Ibid, 15-17.
30 “All-Stars Lose to Norwich Italians,” Willimantic Daily Chronicle (Jul 5, 1933).
Leib, wrote, “Next to the red school house, there has been no greater agency in bringing our different races together than our national game, baseball. Baseball is our real melting pot.” 32 By this idea, baseball was a way to teach immigrants about American lifestyle, beliefs, and culture. John Thorn, a sports historian, has argued that “The national pastime became the great repository of national ideals, the symbol of all that was good in American life: fair play (sportsmanship); the rule of law (objective arbitration of disputed); equal opportunity (each side has its innings); the brotherhood of man (bleacher harmony); and more.” 33 Baseball apparently represented the best aspects of American life, and since it was a sport that required little understanding of English, it was seen as an ideal tool to help integrate immigrants: “Baseball crossed the barriers of language and nationality to unite players who shared a love of the game. As baseball closed the gap between race, ethnicity, and nationality, the national pastime took on a new demeanor.” 34

**Mill League Teams**

The textile industry was prevalent throughout Connecticut, and many mills used industrial paternalism to both control and Americanize their immigrant workers. Industrial paternalism, or industrial benevolence, were ways that a mill, industry, or company provided for their employees, with the intent of keeping the workers happy and controlled. By supplying services and welfare such as housing, education, libraries, or sports teams, companies kept their workers happy, willing to work, and less likely to strike. 35 In areas like Willimantic, baseball and immigration came together to form a unique relationship of ethnicity and sport.

32 Ibid, 3.
In 1910, in Willimantic, the first meeting of the executive committee of the Mill League (an Eastern Connecticut association) gathered to organize baseball teams. Representatives from Jewitt City, Baltic, Tafftville, Greenville, Willimantic, and the Y.M.C.A. met and established a league for boys and young men. These industrial towns and cities were taking steps to Americanize the children of immigrant workers and were therefore providing their companies with a generation of assimilated employees. Soon, teams were made for the players, and in 1913, the American Thread Company Baseball League was developed.

Within the American Thread Company Baseball League were multiple teams. These teams were determined by the department the employee worked in. Each building in the American Tread Company was given a number, and there was Mill No. 1 through Mill No. 6. Likewise, the American Thread Company Baseball League had Team No. 1 through Team No. 6, plus the Dyers (see figure 1), Office and Mechanical, Manufacturing, and the American Thread All-Star Team. The establishment of inter-department teams was not unique to Willimantic and the American Thread Company. Other companies at the time used inter-department rivalries to blur the distinction between ethnicities and nationalities and promote a sense democracy and equal opportunity to a diverse set of workers. These inter-department teams promoted friendly, internal company rivalry (instead of rivalry between ethnic groups and nationalities) and established a sense of loyalty to the employer. After the opening games of the Thread Mill League in 1913, General Kaley, a member of the American Thread Company executive board, said, “Baseball is the greatest sport in the world. I’m pleased that the boys of the local Thread plant have a baseball league. It creates and cements a strong unity. Everybody here today seems to be happy and as for myself I am

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pleased with my visit here today.” The mill league added to the new purposes baseball had for immigrants because it attempted to suppress ethnic identity, promote the importance of the company, and create a unified, American working class among the immigrant workers.

Figure 1. The Dyers baseball team of the American Thread Company Baseball League, 1915.40

The competition between the mill league teams was fierce, and it was well publicized and documented in The Willimantic Daily Chronicle, which gave detailed accounts of the games, and described the players and the games inning by inning. The last weekend of May throughout the

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1910s was the opening of the Mill League’s baseball season, and was a big celebration. The celebrations included a parade, speeches, prizes, and other small ceremonies.\textsuperscript{41} The parades, as shown in figure 2, were big events, and both the City of Willimantic and ATCO participated in them. The first parade, in 1913, was reported as being “a fine street parade of the baseball teams headed by prominent American Thread Company officials, officers of the league and a [20 piece marching] band.”\textsuperscript{42}

Figure 2. A marching band walks in front of ball players down Main Street, Willimantic. Parades, like this one in 1916, were organized by the American Thread Company to celebrate the beginning of the baseball season.\textsuperscript{43}

\textsuperscript{42} “Thread Mill League Opens the Season,” \textit{Willimantic Daily Chronicle} (May 17, 1913).
\textsuperscript{43} Photographs, Folder 54, 1916. Gamache Collection, in Tony Clark Collection, 1880-2008, University Archives, J. Eugene Smith Library, Eastern Connecticut State University, Willimantic, CT.
The 1915 season’s opening day of the American Thread Company Baseball League was described as being “a decided success” for a rainy day, and an “exhibition of how the national game should be played.” There were speeches given by Mayor Daniel P. Dunn, and company vice president W.L. Jenkins, who praised American Thread for “providing amusement and recreation facilities for their employees as well as for the entire city.” Indeed, the company took great care and thought in providing an area of recreation for its workers.

Recreation Park was made by American Thread Company at the site where the Willimantic Fairgrounds used to stand on Main Street. Recreation Park is still used by Willimantic residents today. The first documented use of the park was on Saturday, August 29, 1914, for baseball games. This particular weekend hosted games between the Thread Mill Teams, as well as an all-star match between Hartford’s Ben Hurs, and the Thread Mill All-Stars. The Chronicle made sure to feature the new park, and reported that construction and improvements to the park would happen during the winter of 1915. The establishment and improvement of Recreation Park was demonstrative of industrial paternalism. Providing parks and recreational areas for mill workers was a common occurrence among early twentieth century mills. The Bureau of Labor Statistics in 1916-1917 reported that of the 431 industrial establishments surveyed, 219 had outdoor recreational facilities for their employees.

In May 1915, American Thread Company hosted the Old School and Home Week Celebration, with the official opening of Recreation Park. A front page article in the May 14, 1915, issue of The Chronicle explains the purpose of the new park, writing that the company’s plans included “social welfare of the people of the city as well as the employees [sic] of the company.” The park included two baseball fields, which were flooded and used for ice skating in the winter. It also

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45 Ibid.
47 Tone, Business of Benevolence, 94.
had an area for horse racing, a roque court (a type of croquet), boards and swing sets “for the little ones,” and a men’s bath house. These facilities were a way to coax immigrants to adapt American, or Anglo-Saxon, lifestyles, as croquet and horseracing are British sports, and baseball is an American game. Providing a bath house suggested that hygiene and cleanliness were important, and encouraged immigrants to sustain a certain level of sanitation. With the arrival of the new park came new names for the baseball teams: Princetons (No. 3), The Dartmouths, The Harvards (No. 6), and The Yales (Dyers). Although no explanation was given to the reason behind these names, it could be suggested that they were used as a way to introduce and emphasize the importance and prestige of education. The social welfare that came about with the establishment of Recreation Park was no less than a way to Americanize immigrants, exert industrial paternalism, and control the workers.

Recreation Park became a center of activity for mill workers and immigrants, and the American Thread Company sponsored events to entertain and appease the workers. One such event was Bargain Day. A Chronicle article stated that, “Tomorrow will be bargain day in the baseball line at Recreation Park, there being two games scheduled for the price of one admission.” The two games were Windham High versus Putnam High, followed by the American Thread Company All-Stars against the All-Rockvilles. This shows how popular baseball was, given that large numbers of fans would spend their whole Saturday attending two games. The Chronicle frequently reported attendance of over 1,000 fans, and on May 17, 1913 a front page article said “About 1,200 spectators [were] on the grounds witnessing the three games scheduled.”

Throughout the 1920s and into the 1930s, the American Thread Company League continued to sponsor teams, games, and events. The “Thread Makers,” as they were known, gained more importance and prominence. One article reports that the Thread Makers had “hard games ahead”

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of them, and showcased the growing fame of the team stating that the players would “migrate by auto to Springfield.” 51 The American Thread Mill teams certainly enjoyed a prolific period of success, which spanned a few decades. This success was relished not only by players, but by other mill workers who participated in games and celebrations. In late May 1934, American Thread Company hosted a field day that consisted of baseball, 100-yard dashes, sack races, and three-legged races. 52 More and more leagues were being formed, and in the early 1930s, the American Thread Company formed the ATCO Juniors. 53 Like the formation of teams by the Eastern Connecticut Mill Leagues in 1910, the ATCO Juniors was a way for industrial paternalism to reach the second generation, and the future wave of mill workers.

Ethnic Leagues

The functions of mill leagues as compared to ethnic leagues were different, although they shared a common goal of acculturation and integration. Mill leagues established teams to expose immigrant workers to baseball and the American values that were present in the sport, and to diminish ethnic rivalries. Baseball was used by many companies to “enhance work performance,” “[foster] independence and mutual responsibility,” and create an “enthusiasm on the baseball field would not end when the game did. Instead it would be channeled into work.” 54 Baseball was a specific and deliberate sport to choose to use as a way to integrate immigrant workers. First, it was the most popular and well known sport of the time. Second, it possessed American values and was thought to teach immigrants about fairness, equality, hard work, democracy, and the law. The American Thread Company leagues used a combination of industrial paternalism and baseball to utilize the sport as a way to control and introduce integration upon its workers. In mill leagues, players of all

51 “Hard Game Ahead of Thread Makers,” Willimantic Daily Chronicle (July 9, 1920).
54 Tone, Business of Benevolence, 95.
different nationalities, ethnicities, and backgrounds played together on one team, which was used by
the mills to establish and forge a distinct American working class culture. The mill leagues aimed to
erase ethnic identity, and instead form a working class American identity. Ethnic leagues, on the
other hand, were played by immigrants of the same nationality, ethnicity, and background, and were
used as a way to celebrate heritage while embracing American culture. These leagues and teams
provided a more relaxed atmosphere and were focused on fun, socialization, and friendly
competition, as well as integration. Although both leagues had an ultimate goal of integration, the
main difference was in the approach and attitude. Mill leagues were forceful, while ethnic leagues
were relaxed and provided an ‘at your own pace’ method to integration.

Ethnic leagues and teams became popular in the late 1920s and early 1930s. These teams
had a different function and approach to baseball and integration as compared to the mill leagues.
Ethnic leagues focused on the socialization and adaptation aspects of immigrant’s baseball, as
opposed to the stark Americanization that mill leagues promoted. The idea of ethnic leagues was to
have immigrants take control of their integration and introduce themselves to American culture on
their own terms and with their own people. Ethnic leagues provided an atmosphere for immigrants
to socialize and interact with people from their homeland. These leagues were important social
institutions, much like ethnic clubs and fraternal organizations. Baseball was used by immigrants
because it was an easy way for them to introduce themselves and participate in American culture. I
have observed that ethnic leagues had two main objections. The first was to provide a place and
time for immigrants of a similar nationality to come together, play, and socialize. The second was
self-integration – a desire to learn, understand, and participate in American life and culture. In 1908,
the Willimantic Emeralds, probably an Irish team for boys, was formed. The first team included
names such as Pat Connell, John F. McCarthy, and Jap Sullivan.\textsuperscript{55} These boys, who grew up playing

\textsuperscript{55} Anthony F. McKenna, \textit{The Sports Review} (Willimantic: Gane and Son Printers, 1936), 18.
an American sport and being exposed to the American values of baseball, were integrating themselves into American society, lifestyle, and culture. A May 1916 Chronicle article states that the Emeralds (see figure 3) continued to be a strong and popular team. The article gives a detailed account of the game and reports on the success of the team, saying “the visitors were harmless…at bat,” and that “Two double plays by the Emeralds snuffed out chances for the Bristolites to dent the platter.”

Figure 3. The young boys of the Emerald Baseball Team pose for a picture in 1908.

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57 The Sports Review, 18.
Another team worth mentioning, although not specific to Willimantic, were the Norwich Italians, who reached their height in the 1930s. The Italians were an adult league, and would often compete against the Thread Makers. This league demonstrates the initiative and control immigrants exerted in regulating their own cultural integration, and shows how the use of baseball as a tool of acculturation was not limited to Willimantic. Since baseball was so big at the time, *The Chronicle* would report and keep statistics on most regional teams, including the Norwich Italians, even though Norwich had its own newspapers.\(^{58}\)

Polish immigrants to Willimantic were quick to establish clubs and organizations, including a baseball team. The Polish team in town operated through the St. Stanislaus Polish Young Men’s Club, but were known by their team name as St. Stan’s. The team, established in the 1920s, enjoyed the peak of its popularity throughout the Great Depression – an era in time where people would turn to entertainment, like sports and movies, to avoid the reality of the depression. In the spring of 1934, the St. Stan’s merged with the Tadeusz Kosciuszko Polish Naturalization Club, and the team “greatly changed from the 1933 edition.”\(^{59}\) The fact that the Poles had a Naturalization Club again demonstrates immigrants introducing themselves to American culture on their own terms. In this instance, part of their terms included playing baseball. *The Chronicle* reports the St. Stan’s as being a very strong team, and a few years prior, in 1930, pitcher Raymond Andrychowski, had the opportunity to try out for the Brooklyn Dodgers. Other Polish teams operating during this time period were the Chapman Aces, and the Polish Nats.\(^{60}\)

By the late 1930s, *The Chronicle* was not reporting as feverously on the mill league or ethnic league games, instead paying attention to professional baseball and other sports, including golf, tennis, and horse racing. However, the teams discussed in this paper still continued to play, and

\(^{58}\) “All-Stars Lose to Norwich Italians,” *Willimantic Daily Chronicle* (Jun 5, 1933).

\(^{59}\) “St. Stan’s to Open Season on Sunday,” *Willimantic Daily Chronicle* (May 3, 1934).

\(^{60}\) “Polish Exhibit,” Windham Textile Museum, 2011.
immigrant involvement in baseball continued to grow. As different waves of immigrants continued to arrive in Willimantic, they and their children were introduced to, and participated in baseball. Polish involvement in baseball remained strong, and in the 1960s, the Pulaski Club sponsored a team called the “Pulaski-Americans.”61 In the 1970s, my Ukrainian father found himself involved in baseball and realized how it helped shaped an American identity within himself. In the 1980s, he observed Puerto Rican classmates and teammates using baseball in a similar manner. The 1983 Windham High school baseball team had a number of Puerto Rican students on it, some who had immigrated that year. A Chronicle article quoted my father talking about these students saying that being on the team helped them “learn English faster,” and that the new Puerto Rican students “had no trouble being accepted on this team, no trouble at all.” One immigrant student, Tomas (Tato) Ortiz said in the same article that the team used both Spanish and English to communicate signals, and that being part of the team helped him feel welcomed and accepted in American life.62 Windham High School Coach Vic Alers, himself a Puerto Rican, realized the potential baseball had for integrating cultures, and worked hard to introduce Puerto Ricans to American culture, and vice versa.63 The closing of the American Thread Company in Willimantic in 1985 did not end immigrant involvement in baseball. The Poles continued showing commitment to baseball, and in the late 1980s, Willimantic Little League coach, Stanley Kokoska, created the Polish National Youth Baseball Foundation. This organization singlehandedly brought baseball to Poland by establishing teams and supplying equipment to over forty-four Polish towns and cities. This organization worked until the early 2000s.64 The Willimantic Polish Club still demonstrates its participation in baseball today by providing scholarships to local Polish ball players. Today, Willimantic baseball

61 Ibid.
teams are filled with children and adults who are immigrants, or children and grandchildren of immigrants.

Conclusion

In Willimantic in the early twentieth century, baseball had different purposes for immigrants than it did for native-born Americans. For immigrants, baseball was a way to Americanize, socialize, integrate, and adapt to American life. Baseball was a model sport to present to immigrants because of the prevalence of American values in the game. Baseball was used to teach immigrants about democracy, teamwork, and law and order. Mill leagues and ethnic leagues were used from 1910 to the late 1930s in Willimantic as a way to help immigrants adapt to American culture and participate in the all-American pastime. In addition to being a tool for education, baseball was used to divert ethnic rivalry by replacing it with inter-department rivalry. Industrial paternalism was used in tandem with baseball to integrate immigrants. Through baseball and industrial paternalism, the American Thread Company created a unified American working class, without foreign cultures and rivalries, and attempted to remove traces of ethnicity while establishing a sense of unity and loyalty to the company. Ethnic baseball leagues provided a way for immigrants to ease themselves into American culture at their own pace, and with a people and language they were familiar with. The purpose and function of ethnic leagues was not solely to integrate the players, but to provide socialization, fun, and entertainment in a way that would benefit immigrants in their effort to understand and adapt to life in America. The two types of leagues had different intentions, but both were seen as a way for immigrants to Americanize, integrate, and socialize. Willimantic, which has a rich history of immigration and baseball, continues to live up to the history of its past in the present day.